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Vol. 45 No. 1 January/February 2003

CAROLINA christian

"And so we will be with the Lord forever.
Therefore encourage each other with
these words."
(1 Thess. 4:17-18)

CAROLINA christian

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Editorial & Publication Staff
Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
Peyton Crump, Design Editor

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Dennis Conner
PO Box 1369
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Address news items to:
Mark Hudson
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Living in the Hard Times

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Dennis Conner

It seems to be the unending mantra of the evening news anywhere and everywhere in America: "More job losses as ___________ (you fill in the blank) announced that it is closing plants... " Here in the Carolinas textile workers have been hit particularly hard. Better not mention NAFTA in these parts unless you like living dangerously. In our church family at Yadkinville, five people have lost jobs, which represent a little more than 10% of our family units. This time around, however, it is not only the blue collar worker who is hurting. There is also a nasty ring around the white collar corporate scene. These are hard times.

"Christ is coming for those who endure!"

Add to these worries the tearing apart of families as men and women, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives are being constantly deployed for what seems like certain war. You may say, "But soldiers understand that the possibility of war goes with the job description." That may be, but that doesn't make it easier on the loved ones left behind, or the loved ones being sent. These are hard times.

On top of it all, it seems that there is more trouble in churches than ever before. Division, wrangling, back biting, and splitting. Churches are multiplying, but not quite the way the Lord intended. Let one issue die and we'll come up with another before the ink of our brotherhood papers and the spilled blood (I'm speaking metaphorically, of course) of the victims left in the wake of our warring dries. These are indeed hard times.

So what word is there for people in these hard times? Does the church have a message, a word from the Lord that it can share with hurting people? We don't dare be silent. To be silent would be to ignore countless opportunities for outreach and relevancy. Worse, to be silent in such times would be callous. Worse yet, it would be sin.

Let us take our word, our healing message, from James 5:7, "Be patient brothers, until the Lord's coming...be patient, and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near," (James 5:7-8). There are two alternatives to dealing with the hard times: give in to despair, or be patient. James opts for patience. However, there is more to this patience than merely holding on to your stock portfolios and riding out the storm. No, he speaks of a patience that is grounded in a truly long term vision.

The nature of the patience that James speaks of is grounded in the promised return of Christ. It is significant that one out of every thirteen verses in the New Testament scriptures contains a reference to the second coming of Christ, thus attesting to the vibrant hope of the first century church (folks who really knew what hard times were). Jesus' return was a promise (not a wish) they embraced with aching hearts.

It's also significant that the typical reference to the second coming is in the context of suffering and difficulty. His return would mean deliverance from the struggles and disappointments of the flesh. This was not escapism, but deliverance that they hoped for. It was not their wish to just "fly away" from life's troubles. They were willing to live out the life appointed them. It's just that it was the thought that someday Jesus would come back for them that gave them the strength to make it from one day to the next. The word of scripture is that you can endure the hard times of the present because of the anticipated and certain glory of the future times.

This stands in stark contrast to the way the doctrine of the second coming has often been preached in the past. We all have vivid memories of those "hellfire and brimstone" sermons that were used to scare sinners into the kingdom. The truth is, there is a place for preaching about hell to sinners. The problem is that such preaching was (and still is, in many circles) also directed at saints to scare them into staying in the kingdom. However, in the New Testament, the teaching of the second coming to Christians was intended to comfort and encourage believers, not scare them. Paul employed this formula over and over in his letters to the Thessalonians, for instance. In these uncertain and difficult times, the church has a wonderful opportunity to present the good news (not just the bad news) of Jesus' return. After all, his coming again is the object of our hope, not our dread.

It is also the nature of patience in James that it trusts a power beyond us. The world says that in the hard times we should just "grit it out." James says, " to Wait on the Lord." He uses the illustration of the farmer. Once the farmer prepares the soil and plants the seed, he must then wait for the early and late rains that will bring the crop to maturity. There is nothing he can do to hurry the rains; he has no control over them. The rain will come in its due time. The harvest, consequently, will come in its due time. The farmer must trust those powers that are beyond his control. Thus, amid their experiences of suffering and hard times, it was necessary for James' readers to develop an attitude of longsuffering forbearance as they waited upon God to bring his purposes to fruition.

This is not to suggest that patience is altogether passive. The farmer prepared the soil and planted the seed and did what he could to nurture that which had been planted. As the Christian endures the hard times, waiting for God to accomplish his ultimate purpose in Christ, he or she does not pass the time sitting idly by. James speaks of the duties of patience: "establish your hearts" (the need is for a fixed heart; courage, not fear and weakness), "do not grumble against one another" (community solidarity is vital to survival in the hard times).

Then James offers this final word: "You can endure, because others have endured before you." He mentions the prophets of old and Job (the ultimate example of patient endurance). One thing is obvious in all their examples — the character of God's grace (v. 11b). God is full of compassion and mercy. That truth, ultimately, is the source of our assurance in the hard times. God will bless us, even in our trials, and he will bless us supremely in the return of our Lord Jesus.

"*Christ is coming!*
Let creation from her groans and travail cease;
Let the glorious proclamation hope restore and faith increase.
Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
Come thou blessed Prince of Peace.
Long thine exiles have been pining, far from rest, and home, and Thee;
but in heav'nly vestures shining, they their loving Lord shall see.
Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
Haste the joyous jubilee.
(Joachim Neander, 1680)

Times are hard, but don't give up. Christ is coming for those who endure!

The Fast Food Syndrome

Ron Newberry

You have likely seen the sign in a restaurant window indicating that animals are not allowed in except service animals. While we may think of "guide dogs" first when reflecting on animals that are trained to benefit us, they are by no means the only ones. Dogs are trained to assist police officers. They are trained to find people trapped under tons of debris. They are trained to find cadavers. These animals get special privileges because they are more than pets. They are important to our welfare. Therefore they are allowed to go into restaurants, malls and even fly on commercial jets.

"He gave up heaven to become one of us."

As is the case with almost all privileges someone always tries to take advantage of the situation. Back in 1999 you may have read about the woman who told US Airways she needed to bring her service animal on the flight with her. The airline representative asked her for more details. She said that her thirteen-pound pig was needed for "emotional support" and that she had a doctor's note saying so.

Imagine the airline's surprise when the woman showed up for her flight leading her pig. Mind you it wasn't a thirteen-pound pig or even a 130-pound pig. It was a 250-pound porker. The unruly animal ran around the cabin and even tried to break into the cockpit.

This may be an extreme example, but it does illustrate a principle that is becoming more and more prevalent. Here was a woman who represents many citizens among us who are willing to take advantage of rules so they can have their things their way. Unfortunately, when we "have things our way," we often do so at someone else's expense. We see it in amusement park lines when others cut in line. We see it in traffic when a driver cuts off another driver. We see it in front of the supermarket when someone parks in the "no parking fire lane" or tries to take their twenty-three items through the express line designed for shoppers with ten items or less.

Pushing someone else aside to get ahead has become the norm. This way of thinking and behaving easily becomes a habit. We elbow and shove to get what we want when we want it, constantly equipped for battle so we come out "number one." As a result, selfishness becomes an acceptable standard.

This "fast food syndrome" is about having everything our way. Unfortunately this behavior isn't just found in the world; it has jostled its way into the church as well. This group leaves, that family transfers, this clique visits another church, that faction splits away from the church to do their own thing. Why? The fast food syndrome. They want everything their way. If they can't have it their way, then they hit the highway. Those among them who clamor for exactness in all doctrinal issues (as identified by them) seem to forget that one of the major doctrines of the New Testament is unity.

I don't believe that this "fast food syndrome" is what Jesus had in mind for his disciples. To underscore the point, he authenticated his intentions by living his life the way he wanted us to live ours: as a servant deferring to the best interest of others. Paul writes in Philippians 2:3-5, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." He then explains that Jesus didn't consider equality with God something to be held onto at all costs. He gave up heaven to become one of us.

How much smoother the world would run if we had the attitude of Christ. Come to think of it, that wouldn't be a bad way for Christians to think either would it? In fact, if I'm not mistaken, that is exactly how disciples of Jesus are supposed to think and act. Remember this "fast food syndrome" problem the next time you get ready to drive a wedge that will separate you from someone else simply over wanting it "your way."

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Real Men Part I: Real Men Love The Lord Our God

Russ Jurek

This will be the first installment in a five part series on Real Men! The next five editions of Carolina Christian will carry articles in this column dedicated to men's leadership in the home. This series of articles will focus on building men to be God's leaders in their families. My prayer is that they will help us on the front lines of the battle for the family we are waging against Satan. With strong leaders on the front lines, perhaps we can begin to turn the tide in the war and save our families in our churches and communities.

Recently, I saw two bumper stickers on a lady's car in the lane next to me at a traffic light. One read, "Real Men Love Jesus." The other read, "Honk if you love Jesus." The man in the car behind her must really be in love with the Lord because he was honking his horn and waving as the lady in front of him missed the light while fumbling through her purse!

Real men really do love Jesus, but honking our own horns about it is not what really matters. What does matter is that men love the Lord so much that the horns of victory are sounding as families are being led away from the world and into Christ. Be assured that God knows what Satan is doing to destroy our families. You may ask, "Why doesn't he do something, then, if he really cares?" He already has! He gave husbands and fathers to lead their families and protect them from Satan's attacks. God instructed the Israelites to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deut. 6:5). Jesus, when asked which of all the commandments was the greatest, quoted this passage (Mark 12:30). God knows that when a man loves Him with everything within himself, God has first place in that man's life. When God has first place in a man's life, everything that man does will be directed at glorifying God. That man simply can't help being a godly husband and father who leads his family away from destructive behaviors and activities and toward activities that will build them up in the Lord.

A casual relationship with God won't do. Just "going to church" or saying prayers at meals will not suffice. This kind of "love" of God is superficial and will only give a family a false sense of security in the war. God wants us to love him with all of our being! Men who try to fight on the front lines without loving God are risking the loss of their family to the enemy. Brothers, it's time we stand up as men who give themselves totally to the Lord first, so we will lead our families on to victory in Christ!

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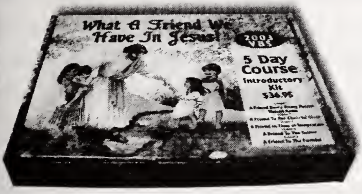

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Evaluating Your Spiritual Life

David French

Psalm 23 is certainly one of the most uplifting, comforting passages in the Bible. It conveys an intimacy with God that we all long for and desire. The Psalmist obviously felt the presence of God in his life when he wrote this psalm. It must have been one of those "mountain top" experiences when God seemed near and very real in his life.

But what interests me is the psalm that comes just before Psalm 23. The contrast could not be any sharper: "My God, why have you forsaken me… O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer me…" (Psalm 22:1-2). Most bible students believe David was the author of both these psalms. Thus, they each reflect two very different experiences in the spiritual life of David.

What we all desire, of course, is the "mountain top" experience of Psalm 23. We long for that feeling of being close to God — the way we felt the day we were baptized into Christ. But, unfortunately, this is not the way many of us feel at times in our lives. Instead of feeling God is near, we feel the absence of God. Instead of intimacy, we feel disconnected from God. And, instead of feeling our cup is overflowing with the goodness of God, we feel abandoned and uncertain of God's goodness.

This contrast is reflected throughout the Psalms. Consider Psalm 10:1... "Why do you stand far off, O God? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble." Later, the Psalmist writes, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart all the day? How long will my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death…" (Psalm 13:1-3). Again, he writes, "Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice, and be gracious to me and answer me. When you said, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to you, 'Your face, O Lord, I shall seek.' Do not hide your face from me…" (Psalm 27:7-9). Such cries of despair are echoed throughout the Psalms. We must, therefore, conclude that such feelings as these are also a part of our spiritual life just as are feelings of intimacy with God.

The reason I bring this up is because I suspect that there is a tendency among us today to base our relationship with God on feelings and emotions. I believe this to be a most inadequate foundation. Yet, it seems to be the primary focus for many of our culture today. While our relationship with God often involves feelings of joy and intimacy, I do not believe it should be based on the "feeling of intimacy."

Of course, what we all long for is what Adam and Eve had in Paradise when God walked among them and conversed with them face-to-face. We desire what Enoch had. We seek the joy and excitement that the Ethiopian Eunuch experienced after he was baptized and went on his way rejoicing! It's that "mountain top" feeling that we once had just after our baptism that we covet. We want our relationship with God to always be like that.

Unfortunately, that is not the way it is for most of us. The feeling of spirituality and the ecstasy of being intimate with God is not something that can be sustained indefinitely. This is because feelings are unstable and precarious. Feelings are secondary emotions which we cannot control. Although there are things that we can do to cultivate certain feelings and emotions, we cannot sustain or perpetuate them indefinitely in every situation or experience of life. Not in this world.

Thus, if we base the quality and happiness of our lives on the need to maintain the feeling of the close presence of God, we are going to be disappointed. Our lives must be founded on something more meaningful and eternal in nature.

Our spiritual life cannot be judged primarily by how spiritual we feel, how righteous we feel, or how close to God we feel. This just isn't reality. Intimacy often exists even when it is not felt. Righteousness can flourish in our lives even when we don't feel righteous. Truth exists even though it may not be recognized. Yes, the tree that falls in the forest does make a sound, even if no one is around to hear it. Contentment can thrive in the midst of poverty. Joy and happiness can blossom even in the midst of suffering. And, freedom can exist in the midst of oppression. Our mistake is in thinking these things don't exist unless we experience or "feel" them to be so. This is why our spiritual life cannot be based on our feelings of spirituality. Sometimes we do feel close to God. Sometimes it is a mountaintop experience. Yet, at other times, we may be angry with God, frustrated spiritually, confused, or feel forgotten and abandoned by God (feelings expressed throughout the Psalms).

Consider David. At times he praised God, overflowing with

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(Evaluating continued)
feelings of joy. But, at other times, he felt alone and abandoned by God. At times it was, "my cup overflows;" but at other times, it was, "God, fill my cup because it is empty and dry!"

Jeremiah was one of the most faithful, righteous men of the Old Testament; yet he spent most of his life feeling abandoned and disconnected from God — confused about God's relationship to him and His people. "This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears. No one is near to comfort me, no one to restore my spirit... I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light," (Lamentations 1:16; 3:1).

God communicated to Joseph a plan for his life, but then he was sold by his brothers, betrayed by his master's wife, forgotten by the butler, and left forgotten in a prison for many years. Certainly he must have felt confused and abandoned by God. Yet, Joseph is presented as the most righteous of men of Genesis.

Most of God's greatest servants in the Bible were men and women who often did not "feel" spiritual and righteous with God. Most of them felt unworthy and forgotten by God (Heb 11:13-16; 32-40). Yet, they were God's righteous people. Just because they did not feel intimate or righteous with God does not mean that they were not. Even Jesus felt abandoned and disconnected from God in the final hours of his life (Matthew 27:46).

The reason I am making such a big deal about this is because I sense that there are many of us who conclude something must be wrong in our relationship with God because we don't "feel" as spiritual, righteous, and intimate with God as we think we should. Of course, if we are not right with God, that can be a very good reason why we don't feel as we ought in our relationship with Him. But, I believe it is a mistake to judge the quality of our spiritual life based primarily on our feelings of spirituality.

This can give us a false reading. It works the other way too. Just because we feel spiritual and righteous does not mean that we are. In fact, there are many, I suspect, who attend an emotionally-charged worship that produces a spiritual "high" and yet leave never realizing that their life is far from what God desires. One can feel spiritual and yet lack spiritual purity. One can leave church praising God, only to return the next day to their dishonest practices without ever realizing that the feeling of righteousness is not reality.

Being edified is important and necessary, but it must also lead to and involve transformation. And, transformation is painful. It forces us to confront ourselves and to change our way of living. We are not likely to feel spiritual nor feel positive about ourselves during this process. Those looking solely for a good feeling are not likely to endure or submit to God's surgical hand. And, in a world looking to religion as something to make them feel better about themselves, the emotional appeal of the "feel-good religion" is quite strong in our world today. Of less interest to the masses are those churches which call people to discipleship and transformation.

Some years ago Amy Grant recorded a song entitled, "Mountain Top." The words of the chorus speak clearly to our culture today:

I'd like to live on a mountain top, fellowshipping with the Lord. I'd like to stay on the mountaintop because I love to feel my spirit soar. But, I've got to come down from the mountain top, to the people in the valley below or they will never know that they can go to the mountain of the Lord.

Who among us does not desire the mountaintop experience, fellowshipping with the Lord? But, we cannot stay long on the mountaintop, nor (for selfish reasons) focus our efforts on endeavors to recapture and recreate those experiences. To do so would be unfaithful, for we must engage in ministry, and ministry can be messy and difficult. It often produces feelings of discouragement, abandonment, resentment, failure, persecution, doubt and confusion (even when things do go right and people still reject us).

There are moments in our spiritual life when we will feel spiritually "high" (mountaintop experience), sensing the very presence of God. These are to be valued when they do occur. But, there will also be times when life and ministry will become messy and confused and God will seem distant and obscure to us. In such times we will likely feel discouraged and unspiritual. The temptation for us is to conclude that how we feel is reality when it is not. The intimacy we seek with God is something that will only be realized fully when Christ returns. Until that time, we will continue to struggle in a world alienated from God.

In the meantime, our task is

(continued on page 16)

The Seal of God

Carl Etchison

"O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." (Isaiah 64:8)

"In Him we were chosen... And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession, to the praise of His glory." (Ephesians 1:11-14)

Since ancient times craftsmen and artists have placed their "maker's mark" on everything from paintings and sculptures to furniture, stained glass and silver tea sets. Because most of these people were tradesmen, the mark came to be known as a "trademark." In our own times, we may think of well known trademarks such as the Nike "Swoosh" or the red, white and blue circle of Pepsi. And even today, artists and craftspeople still put their "trademarks" on their pieces of work. The maker's mark is proof of ownership, the seal of approval and authenticity.

Christians, too, have a maker's mark on them in the form of the Holy Spirit. He is God's seal of ownership, identifying us as belonging to him.

This truth is evidenced by what the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians. He told them that when they came to faith through the gospel, God placed his mark on them. That mark was the Holy Spirit. The seal of the Spirit was proof that they were in fact chosen in Christ. He was also the proof that they belonged to God as His possession.

Paul wrote something very similar to the Corinthian believers, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through Him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come," (2 Corinthians 1:20-22). We are signed, sealed, and will be delivered! In our investment culture original works of good artists and craftsmen are quite valuable. Consequently, many counterfeits flood the market and they even have, seemingly, the right trademark. So, some works come with a "certificate of authenticity" from experts. They look to see if an object is authentic not only by checking the maker's mark, but also comparing what they know of the maker with what they see in the work. That is, they look for distinctive marks and traits of the artist in the work and then decide if the work is really genuine. The same is true with Christians.

When anyone sees a person who claims to be a Christian, but there is no evidence in their life of a change of heart, an attitude of service, and actions of faith, then you can know the person is "counterfeit." He's a forgery, a cheap imitation; the distinctive traits of the Maker's work are missing in that person.

When you look in the mirror (whether spiritually or physically) don't just see a person who is sinful and fallen and can't get up. See someone who is sinful and forgiven and can't give up because the Marker's mark is there. See yourself as one of God's works of art. God's mark, His Holy Spirit, is proof of God's ownership and approval, marking us as authentically His.

So, do you want to become a work of art, a masterpiece in the hands of the Master Potter? Want to have His seal placed on you and in you? You have to turn yourself over to him and let him shape you!

"O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand."

Contact Carl Etchison at
1706 Greenville Blvd. SE,
Greenville, NC 27858.

(Evaluating continued)

to "trust and obey" (i.e., to walk by faith and be faithful to our calling). Nowhere in the Bible can I find where it tells us that we must feel spiritual and righteous. But, it does say again and again, "be faithful and obedient." Let us, therefore, redirect our energies away from trying to re-create and sustain for ourselves a "feeling" of spirituality and apply ourselves, instead, to doing God's righteousness on earth. We will, after all, be judged by what we have done in this world (2 Corinthians 5:10) and not by how intimate, spiritual, or righteous we have felt in this lifetime.

David French serves the Pine Valley Church of Christ in Wilmington, NC, as preacher.

When God Doesn't Endorse Our Plans

Jim Mullican

Sometimes we make plans for the way we want things to go, but they don't always work out the way we plan. We may want a particular job, but we don't get it. We may plan to grow old with our husband or wife but find the marriage ended too soon by the death of our partner. I've known several men who wanted to devote their lives to preaching the gospel but abandoned those plans because of a wife who would not agree to the insecurity of living life subject to the whims of the brethren. I've known people who wanted to be missionaries but were unable to obtain permission to enter the foreign country or could not find the financial support to do so.

The disappointment and sorrow experienced by those who have suffered these situations or others like them is difficult to deal with, but we need to remember that whenever God shuts one door, he generally opens another for us. We need to be willing to look for that door and go through it.

In Acts 16:6-10, Paul seems to have planned to go to the great city of Ephesus, where several major roads intersected, plant the church there, and then watch it spread throughout the province of Asia. Scripture says, however, "Paul and his companions traveled through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas." Here he saw the vision of the man inviting him to come into Macedonia. In complying with that request, he began some of his most fruitful work in Philippi, Thessalonika, Berea, Corinth and beyond. Eventually, the Lord also allowed him to work in Ephesus, but it was done on God's timetable rather than Paul's.

We cannot know what plans God has for us in the future, but we can trust him to plan opportunities for us to serve him here in this life until he sees fit to call us to serve him in heaven. When God closes one door, remember to look for the one he opens next. Good things will await you behind that door as you are wholeheartedly seeking to serve God.

The Communion of the Saints

David Kneip

As I write this to you now, I imagine that you have friends who are going through some very difficult times. Some are going through their parents' divorce. You may know someone who's just been told they have a life-threatening illness. What about people who are picked on or beaten down? Know anyone being made fun of for their faith right now?

At the same time, you may also have friends who are living in wonderful times. Do you know people who are new Christians and are, as we say, "on fire for the Lord"? What about some who have gone off to college and are finally beginning to understand what it means to have joy and peace before God? You might have friends who have overcome their pride and arrogance and are beginning to be able to be thankful to God and not themselves for the good in their lives.

I suspect that, if you think hard, you know people in many of these situations as well as many others that I have not named. So how do you respond?

"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 11:36).

There are people around us all the time who are hurting, joyful, happy or sad, and who would be willing to share that with someone if only someone were available. Jesus responded to others with compassion no matter the situation — mourning or rejoicing — because that's how God responds to us. This suggests to me that Christianity is not just about figuring out what "salvation" means in your head; rather, it includes living out salvation — wholeness — among other people. I want to encourage you to begin looking at the people in your life as Jesus did — with compassion.

OK, now, I know what you're saying: "David, you can't just tell us to have compassion on people. How do I do it?" Fair enough. You're right — it isn't enough to just tell you to do it, and I certainly can't wave a magic wand over you so that you suddenly have compassion. So, let me give you a couple of suggestions.

First, you can develop compassion for others by spending time with people your own age. If you're shy, try to speak up a little more, maybe at first just with one person at a time. Ask how someone's doing, and see where conversation may lead you. If you're more outgoing, don't be content to just talk on the surface with your friends. Dig more deeply, even if you have to take time to do it. Don't be afraid to ask things like, "Hey, I heard your parents were splitting up — how're you doing with that?" And again, see where conversation leads.

Second, you can develop compassion by spending time with different kinds of people, especially at your church. I know it's great to have youth group time, but you're not always going to be hanging out with people your own age. Pretty soon you guys are going to be adult members of the church, in adult classes and attending adult activities. It will help you now to begin learning how to get to know people your parents' and even grandparents' ages. You'll discover a whole new wonderful part of what God is doing in the world and how you can join him in it.

Finally, you can develop compassion by spending time with people who believed in God a long time ago. I'm not talking about ouija boards or séances here. I'm talking about a set of e-mails to God that our Lord and the church have preserved for us in a book called "Psalms." If you go to the middle of your Bible, you will find 150 believers' prayers that come from an unbelievable variety of situations. People are sick, they've recovered from sickness, they're being tempted or tortured, they're joyful, they're mourning, they're old, they're young... the variety is amazing. This book of the Bible has helped me like no other to understand a little more of what people in various life situations are feeling and experiencing. That's the key, you see — if I can get into the hearts of others, then I can "feel with" them, which is exactly what compassion is.

I challenge you this spring to spend time with others and in the Psalms — to delve into life in ways you haven't before so that you can show that Christ-like compassion to the people around you.

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The Foundation is Not Cracked, but the Walls Lean a Little

Greg Cummings

"I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). Jesus built his church out of people: imperfect, impolite, immature people. He knew the quality of his selected building material and chose to build his church anyway. No perfect church ever existed. The Jerusalem church in Acts 2 was perfect only if congregations without elders or deacons are perfect. In Acts 5 Jerusalem dealt with lying members and in Acts 6, suffered squabbling in the benevolence ministry. The epistles to the churches clearly show every New Testament congregation had its own set of problems. God's people never have been and never will be perfect until we are with him in heaven.

Christ built his church, knowing we would have doctrinal problems, interpersonal conflicts, personality differences, divisions and rifts in fellowship. He knew his children would be childish, stubborn, selfish and downright mean. While we may look at the church and wonder what went wrong, the flawed nature of his people did not catch the Lord by surprise. He uses us to mold each other. In bigoted brothers we get a glimpse of our own prejudices. In opinionated sisters we are exposed to our own tendencies to act as stand-ins for God. When others wrong us, we learn that forgiveness must be practiced as well as preached. Enduring criticisms forces us to develop perseverance and strength of conviction. Ignorance drives us to study. Disappointing behavior toughens our love. The church is like a rock polisher. As we tumble around together in the container, constantly butting heads and rubbing shoulders, we are changed into something we could never become in a perfect society.

Be thankful for your brothers' and sisters' faults as well as strengths. Their faults probably do more to polish the image of Christ than their strengths do. You are part of the greatest group of people on this earth. You are one of God's people. Fortunately, membership in an imperfect congregation means your faults are not too noticeable. Imagine how embarrassing it would be if the perfect church existed, until you placed membership!

Love the church. See the beautiful bride Christ sees. If Christ can love the church and use it to do his work despite its shortcomings, then certainly we can too.

Thinking Out Loud

Jerry Senn

Some of us do our best thinking as we talk. In this way we share our thought processes and are exposed to the thinking of others. It is probably the case that we don't fully decide how we feel on many subjects until we attempt to express ourselves in some way. When given an opportunity to respond, we are forced to focus and more clearly define our ideas. This is only one of the reasons it is valuable to discuss the teachings of the Bible with others. As we interact, we test our ideas and then listen, which helps us formulate and reshape our faith, leaving it fresh and personal. As we incorporate what we have learned into our own convictions and discard unfounded concepts we might have previously held, we can gain a greater degree of confidence and comfort from our faith.

As I read about the way the early church related to one another, it is clear that they spend considerable time interacting, sharing thoughts and impressions — personal responses to the teaching of the apostles. Expressing ourselves is vital for the formation of strong personal faith. Our faith grows as it is expressed in a non-threatening atmosphere. Thinking out loud about our faith is a major factor in faith development, yet, it is too often neglected in our church life.

One clear insight into an assembly of the early church is found in Acts 20, where Paul met with brethren in Troas. The text reads, "Paul began talking to them... and he prolonged his message until midnight," and then, "he talked with them a long while, until daybreak." (vv. 7, 11). He talked to them, and he talked with them. Even inspired preachers found it important to listen as well as talk.

As Paul anticipated the trip to Rome, he expressed his expectations in these words, "I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine," (Romans 1:11-12). He wanted to "impart" some things, but he also desired to be encouraged and informed by their faith.

I find no biblical example of a service in which there's no interaction among brethren. As Paul tried to correct abuses in the worship style at Corinth, it is evident their assembly had become overly spontaneous and interactive.

(continued on next page)

Confounding Language

Ron Newberry

You have to admit the English language is a disaster waiting to happen for those who come here from foreign countries. I'm surprised that anyone can learn this crazy language. Let my supply you with some evidence.

There is no egg in eggplant, nor ham in hamburger; neither apple nor pine in pineapple. English muffins weren't invented in England, or French Fries in France. Sweetmeats are candies, while sweetbreads (which aren't even sweet) are meat.

Boxing rings are square and a guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor is it a pig. Why is it that writers write, but fingers don't fing; grocers don't groce and hammers don't ham? If the plural of tooth is teeth, why isn't the plural of booth beeth? One goose, two geese. So one moose, two meese?

If teachers taught, why didn't preachers praught? If a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian eat? Why is it someone recites at a play but plays at a recital? How is it we ship by truck and send cargo by ship? Why do we ride on a bus but in a car when we're inside the vehicle in both cases? Why do we have noses that run and feet that smell?

How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same, while a wise man and a wise guy are

(continued on next page)

* * *

(Thinking Out Loud continued)

Confusion reigned. Yet, Paul doesn't condemn the fact that "each one has a psalm… a teaching… a revelation." His complaint was that a state of confusion existed. But, his desire was that "all may learn and all may be exhorted," (1 Corinthians 14:26, 31). He in no way suggested that formality should replace spontaneity when they gathered to be built up in their faith.

Let us learn to "think out loud" concerning our faith and thereby "be encouraged together… each of us by the other's faith."

Jerry Senn serves the Hendersonville church as preacher and shepherd. He can be contacted at 1975 Haywood Rd., Hendersonville, NC 28791. You can access the congregation's website at www.hvlcoc.org.

(Language continued)

opposite? How can overlook and oversee be opposites, while quite a lot and quite a few are alike? How come he who hesitates is lost, but all things come to him who waits?

Have you noticed that we talk about certain things only when they are absent? Have you ever seen a horseful carriage or a strapful gown? Have you ever met a sung hero, experienced requited love or known of gotten gain? Have you ever run into someone who was combobulated, gruntled, ruly or peccable? And where are all those people who are spring chickens, or who actually would hurt a fly?

I have to admit we should marvel at the unique irrationality of a language in which your house can burn up as it burns down, you fill in a form by filling it out, and an alarm clock goes off by going on?

Confusing, isn't it? Just think, even though the English language can be so confounding, God was (and is) still able to communicate his will to us. Yes, there are some passages that are hard to understand. Some texts have two or more equally viable interpretations even though they may have had only one original meaning. Some verses may not ever be understood precisely. In spite of all those caveats, God is still able to tell us what we need to know.

My concern, personally — and I suspect you may have the same problem — is not the passages that I don't understand; it's the ones that I understand clearly that give me difficulties. As I asked in one of the classes I was teaching recently, why do we get so exercised over texts that are difficult to understand and are not "heaven-hell" issues, but blatantly ignore other verses that are so clear? Why are we so quick to draw lines of fellowship and heaven-hell issues out of verses that are vague and completely disregard straightforward texts like "love one another," "be devoted to one another in brotherly love," "honor one another above yourselves," "live in harmony with one another," "stop passing judgment on one another," "accept one another," "bear with one another," "be kind to one another," "submit to one another," etc? And how about the unambiguous, "Make every effort to maintain the spirit of unity in the bond of peace?"

Perhaps those questions need more serious thought. Maybe they're more important than why we drive on parkways and park on driveways.

Sing to the Lord!

Chuck Jones

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before Him with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song. For the Lord is a great God, a great King above all gods. In His hand are the depths of the earth, and mountain peaks belong to Him. The sea is His, for He made it, and his hand formed the dry land." (Psalm 95:1-5)

One of the great privileges we enjoy when God allows us to come into his presence is to sing our praises to him. I believe it's important for us to recognize the direction we're singing when we're singing together in our assemblies. We sing in many, many directions. To each other, to the unbeliever, to the world. And I believe most importantly, to God.

I'll confess — I'm prone to be taken by the melodies and harmonies we sing. I love a good chord, but I believe that what we say is far more important than how we sound. And we've been blessed with some great writers penning great words for us to sing. Give this a try — you know this song well. But don't read the first line and move ahead, and don't sing it. Read these words out loud.

O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder,
Consider all the worlds thy hands have made.
I see the stars. I hear the rolling thunder;
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.
Then sings my soul, my Savior, God, to Thee.
How great thou art; how great thou art.

When I say those words, it helps me realize that when I sing them from the heart, it must be music to God's ears. I am proclaiming to him directly that he is the creator of the universe and all that resides in it is his. Isn't that a great feeling, to know that God will allow us to sing his praises and acknowledge him for all he does and, even better, will pause to listen as we sing to him? How pleasing do you believe it is for God to hear his people sing these words to him?

Father, we love You, we worship and adore You.
Glorify Thy name in all the earth.
Glorify Thy name, glorify Thy name, glorify Thy name in all the earth.

They are such simple expressions: we love you and glorify Your name. But the power comes from the direction in which we sing

(continued on next page)

The Right Church

Jerry Senn

There are more churches in this town (and in most towns) than one can shake a stick at. Each has good people attending weakly, if not weekly. All are trying to do right and 99.9% share some beliefs with all the others. Though most churches claim to follow the Bible, there's enough difference in their interpretation to warrant separation.

As a result, the question that is often raised is, "Which church is right?" How does one know for sure? Does it really matter which church we attend?

Instead, the question should be, "What is the church?" Is it a school, a hospital, a social center, a mutual admiration society or a monument to a man's pride? On the world scene, it is all this and more. But what is the church in the Bible?

The church is people, but not all people. It is saved people, all saved people. No church is recognized by God, except the one Jesus built by saving men and adding them to it. Men are not involved in building Jesus' church, nor do men decide who is or is not in the church. God builds and he alone knows! He saved and adds all who have responded to his love in obedient faith. Unity is not achieved by human effort; God alone weaves submissive souls

(continued on next page)

(Sing to the Lord continued)

them — from our hearts to God.

It's important for me to remember that when I sing it to God, I need to be sincere. In Isaiah 1, God says "stop bringing meaningless offerings." To me, that can only mean one thing: if my heart isn't in it, then I shouldn't say it, or sing it! So, if I sing...

You are exalted, Lord, above all else.

We place You at the highest place, above all else.

Right now where we stand and everywhere we go,

We place You at the highest place so the world will know.

...it's important that I mean it. That I do place him in the highest place right now where I stand and everywhere I go.

Remember, the power in this instance is in the direction — from my heart to God.

Chuck Jones can be contacted at 4900 Providence Rd., Charlotte, NC 28226.

Mize Joins Staff of Children's Home

Dennis Conner

Billy Joe Mize is the newest addition to the staff of Southeastern Children's Home in Duncan, SC. Mize has twenty years of experience with children's homes and other non-profit organizations, plus a career as a preacher with churches in Texas, Alaska, And Colorado. He is now the Director of Development for Southeastern, assuming his

(continued on next page)

(The Right Church continued)

into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13). He initiates and creates.

Jesus is in complete control of his church. We have flexibility and freedom, but no authority (Matthew 28:18). We have creative gifts for useful service, but no license to do as we please. He wants us to think, but not become infatuated with our intellect; it must be controlled by his love. Pride will always destroy. He wants us to live moral lives, but he keeps us pure as we confess our sins (1 John 1:7, 9). Christ is in control of his church.

The church is the saved, pure and simple. Members are devoted to his word to know how to organize, worship and carry out his mission. But, the church is not the savior. Jesus saves, builds and sustains his church. The members are equally related to one another, but Jesus alone is our mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). His church is a family of encouragers who support and discipline its members. And in that family the guiding principle is love, not human rules.

Jesus saves those who receive his grace by a process of faith which leads to repentance and immersion (Acts 2:38). Men must allow God to define this process, rather than endlessly theorizing as to how and when he saves. No "experts" are empowered to interpret the word for the church. Each soul will be held accountable for his own response to grace.

So, which church is right? A better question is, am I in a right relationship with Jesus Christ? If I'm saved by his grace, I am in his church. Now I will want to become associated with a group that is faithful to his word and is seeking to carry out his divine mission.

Blessings of Belonging to Christ

Roger Coffman

A Christian is "one who belongs to Christ." The late Marshall Keeble used to say, "You spell 'Christian' Christ-i-a-n, and what that means is 'without Christ I ain't nothing.'" It may not be good grammar, but it's good theology!

Thinking about those blessings of belonging to Christ leads the apostle Peter to express praise to "the God and Father of

(continued on page 29)

(Mize continued)

duties on October 1, 2002.

Billy comes to Southeastern with over 45 years experience in ministry with Churches of Christ. A graduate of Abilene Christian College and the University of North Colorado, he has preached for congregations in Texas, Alaska and Colorado. He has also served as the Superintendent of Cornhusker Christian Children's Home in Nebraska; Vice President of Development for Lubbock Children's home in Lubbock, TX; President of Rocky Mountain Christian Schools in Denver; and Administrator and Counselor with the University Church of Christ, also in Denver. In addition to his work with Christian elementary education and child and family care agencies, Mize has served as an elder with churches in Nebraska, Colorado and Texas.

Billy and his wife, Lesley, are living in Lexington, SC. In his work for the Southeastern he will place a strong emphasis on helping individuals, couples and families in their preparation for retirement and estate planning. This service, offered by Southeastern, helps people address issues of retirement and estate planning that are not generally touched on by financial and legal professionals.

As a major part of his work, Billy will be available to churches for preaching, teaching and speaking on behalf of Southeastern Children's Home. He is also available as a speaker to community organizations on behalf of the Children's Home. He may be contacted by calling (864) 439-0259.

(Adapted from Southeastern Children's Home News, Winter 2002)

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(Blessings continued)

our Lord Jesus Christ," (1 Peter 1:3). Then, he points to three specific blessings:

New Life, "He has given us new birth," (1 Peter 1:3). In John 21, Jesus offered Peter the opportunity to confess his love for him three different times, just a few weeks after Peter had denied him three times. Jesus extended new life to Peter — if Peter was willing to love him and follow him. It was not a matter of Peter's working his way back into God's good graces. Rather, Jesus wanted Peter to know that he believed in him and had already forgiven him fully and completely. New life is given to all of us who belong to Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the one has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

New Hope, "Into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead," (1 Peter 1:3b). When we think of hope, we naturally think of the future. While this hope certainly involves the future, it is not based on a future event or series of events. It rests squarely on a past event, "the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." When God raised Jesus from the dead, the divine stamp of approval was placed on everything Jesus said and did and was! That is what Paul affirmed when he said that Jesus Christ our Lord "was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection."

God's having raised Jesus from the dead is his guarantee that our hope is not in vain. It is a living hope-as contrasted to a dead one-based on the empty tomb and a living Lord. Any hope that some of us might have entertained about our being acceptable to God on our own merit was dashed against that same cold and cruel cross upon which Jesus died. If God "did not spare his own Son, but gave Him up for us all" (Romans 8:32), He will not spare those of us who choose to bear our own sins to judgment instead of laying them on Jesus. But rising out of this hopeless situation is a new hope that will never disappoint us (Romans 5:5).

New Status, "Into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4). Because we are sons and daughters in God's family through Jesus Christ, we become heirs with Christ, sharing in his inheritance, "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you." The failing stock market, brought about by corporate greed and the related fear of many investors

(continued on next page)

Ponderings

Peter Rode

Some of these one liners are amusing, others not. They all have some spiritual application-some quite obvious, others, hidden. ope will pause for a moment and ponder on their meaning, gain wisdom and insight from them and then apply them to your situation in life.

"There are no crown-wearers in heaven who were not cross-bearers here below." *(Charles H. Spurgeon)*

"They that worship God merely from fear, would worship the devil, too, if he appear." *(Anonymous)*

"Apathy is the glove into which evil slips its hand." *(Bodie Thoene)*

"We evaluate others with a

(Blessings continued)
who do not know whom to trust, has demonstrated just how fickle financial fortunes can be. But our heavenly inheritance can never perish, spoil or fade. And further, it is being reserved in heaven for us. In fact, the same power that preserves the inheritance in heaven also preserves the heir of that inheritance here on earth.

The hope described in Scripture is much different from what the world often calls "hope." Around the first of each year we hear people talking about their hope to win the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes. One does not hope to win a sweepstake, or the lottery. One wishes to win, knowing that it will be pure luck because the odds are several million to one that it will happen. Biblical hope is not built on chance or our performance (like winning the lottery by picking the correct number). This, too, is pure chance. Instead, Biblical hope is built on the foundation of what God has already done in Christ Jesus.

Hope is the theme of Scripture from beginning to end. Many folks see only a hopeless end, but the Christian sees endless hope. When we belong to Christ, he gives us new life, a new hope, and a new status. May we also say, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Roger Coffman preaches for the Church of Christ on Hilton Head Island. He can be contacted at 23 Bow Circle, Hilton Head Island, SC 29928.

God-like justice, but we want others to evaluate us with a God-like compassion." (Sydney J. Harris)

"He who cannot forgive others destroys the bridge over which he himself must pass." (George Herbert)

"Anyone can devise a plan by which good people go to heaven. Only God can devise a plan whereby sinners, which are His enemies, can go to heaven." (Lewis Sperry Chafer)

"Here is a test to see if your mission on earth is finished: If you are alive, it isn't." (Francis Bacon)

"Most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand." (Mark Twain)

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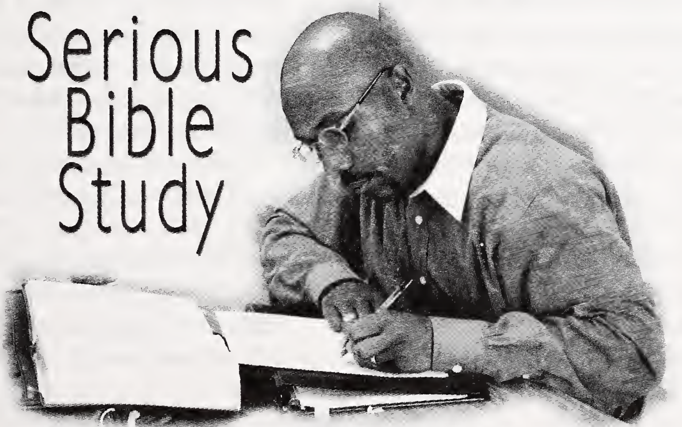

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"You Will Be My Witnesses"

Peter Rode

"You will be my witnesses," (Acts 1:8). This was not an admonition. It was a future fact. The apostles were to be "witnesses" in the sense of 1 John 1:1. They were to be men who had themselves seen, heard, touched, experienced, and were qualified and called to testify accordingly. In essence, Jesus said, "You will receive power to witness of me." That power would result not in propaganda but in witnessing. They were not to be like salesmen going out to peddle a product. Nor were they to be recruiters knocking down doors trying to get people to join a religious club. Christ's power has a personal note about it. Bearing witness means, "You will talk about Me, because you've experienced me." We may not be eye-witnesses in the sense of the apostles, but we can tell about what we know of Christ from our own experience. A witness doesn't deal in hearsay. He doesn't tell what he thinks or suspects. He tells only what he knows. He limits himself to what he has seen and heard. Today, two thousand years later, Jesus still expects his followers to witness to him as they carry out his commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

A real witness is not only to witness in words, but in deeds. After H. M. Stanley had discovered David Livingstone in central Africa, and had spent some time with him, he said, "If I had been with him any longer, I would have been compelled to be a Christian, and he never spoke about it at all." The witness of Livingstone's life proved irresistible.

The word "witness" is a good word and, when used correctly, is filled with meaning. Interestingly, the Greek words for "witness" and "martyr" come from the same root. To be a witness means to be loyal

(continued on next page)

(Ponderings continued)

"I used to have an open mind but my brains kept falling out." (Stephen Wright)

"Forgiveness is our command. Judgment is not." (C. Neil Strait)

"It takes less time to do things right than to explain why you did it wrong." (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

"There are no uninteresting things, only uninterested people." (G. K. Chesterton)

(My Witnesses continued)

no matter what the cost. It describes a committed way of life. All of us are witnessing to something, constantly! We have no choice about being a Christian witness. Our choice is what kind of witness we will be.

Many Christians, however, do not feel free to share their faith. Some may not recognize it as a responsibility, either because of a lack of commitment or because of a misunderstanding. Others would like to share their faith, and perhaps even have tried at some point to follow some highly promoted method, but finally gave up in despair concluding that, for them, witnessing is impossible. Same falsely assume that only "experts" can witness. Some have felt that they must be able to say the right thing at the right time, and quite the right verse for the right need, and supply the right answer to the right question. They are overwhelmed by the demands of expertise. In any case, those in any or all of these categories are intimidated by wrong understandings and expectations.

Our world is where we live, work, play, etc. The kind of mission in which the church must be engaged is basically person-to-person witnessing. This is not to deny a concern for the world that reaches beyond our fences or borders, but it is to emphasize that mission is carried on within one fundamental context — between individuals.

The life and action of the church, including every member of the body, is based on the premise that God loves men and women. His love comes to us and continues to change us into his likeness. Integral to this continuing work of grace is the concern of God for everyone. And we, the recipients of his love, become the channels through which flows the grace, mercy, and compassion of our Father in heaven. We, the church, are now the reconciling agents who must further reconciling reach of divine grace into situations of human need (2 Corinthians 5:17-20). If this is God's work and we are to witness to it, dare we conclude that witnessing to his love and power is optional, or too difficult, or impossible? Never!

So the question we must ask ourselves is, "How do I rate as a witness to Christ? What can I tell others about what God, through Christ, has done for me and in me? How can I demonstrate through my life that I have, and am, experiencing God's grace?"

Peter Rode can be contacted at 5101 W. Friendly Ave., Greensboro, NC 27410.

Brotherhood News

Mark Hudson

Sanford, NC... The Sanford Church of Christ will be hosting a Ladies Day on March 29. The theme will be "Trees of Righteousness: Plantings of the Lord."

Hilton Head Island, SC... The Hilton Head Island church raised $10,000 to equip the new kitchen in Southeastern Children's Home's Sarah Smith Cottage that had been destroyed by fire last summer.

Yadkinville, NC... The 17th annual Small Church Workshop will be May 15-16, hosted by the Yadkinville Church of Christ. The theme will be "Congregational Vitality: Fostering Congregational Life."

Statesville, NC... Brother Stanley Crews, who preached for congregations in both North and South Carolina for many years, went home to be with His Lord on December 11, 2002. A memorial service was held in Sanford, NC and he was buried in the cemetery of the Abilene Church of Christ in Statesville on December 14. His longest ministry in the Carolinas was with the Northview congregation in Statesville. Our hearts, and the hearts of many others in the Carolinas, go out to his loving wife, Pauline, and his children and grandchildren.

Orangeburg, SC... The 59th annual Carolina Lectures will be hosted April 6-10 by the Orangeburg Church of Christ in Orangeburg, SC. The theme will be "According to the Eternal Purpose: Selections from Ephesians." The morning keynote speaker each day will be Melvin Sapp and the evening keynote messages will be delivered by Mel Futrell. For more information, call the church office at (803) 534-7926, or e-mail: PKirkpatrick1@sc.rr.com

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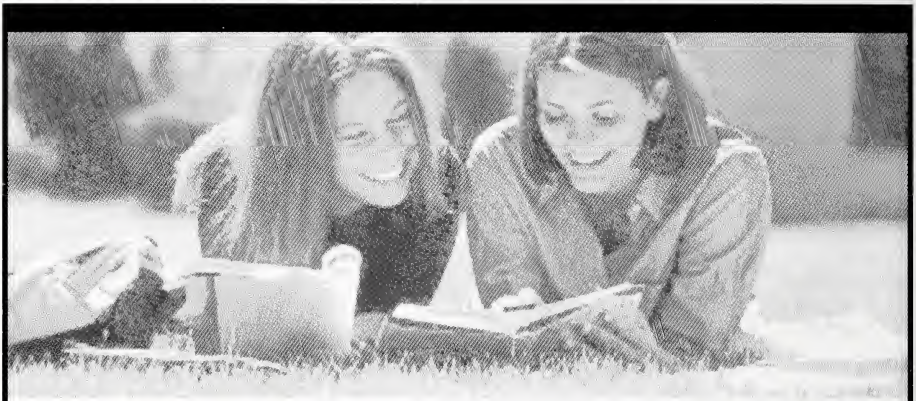

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CAROLINA christian

"God's Enduring Love:
Studies from Hosea"

CAROLINA christian

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Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
Peyton Crump, Design Editor

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The Spirit of Preeminence

Ron Newberry

There are certain books of the New Testament that seem to get little attention for some reason. One such book is 3 John, consisting of only fourteen short verses. Maybe the fact that it is not heavily laced with doctrinal mandates has allowed us to skip over this important message to a friend of John whom he identifies as Gaius. Gaius has a great spirit and he walks faithfully in the truth. He is a role model for others in the church where he lives.

However, there is another brother mentioned in 3 John who is not worthy of emulation. His name was Diotrephes. Diotrephes was a man who loved to have preeminence. He desperately wanted to be first. Have you heard the expression "big fish in a little pond?" That was Diotrephes. He had an unhealthy ambition to be noticed and looked to as the leader. We might do well to remember a lesson the writer John learned about preeminence himself years earlier.

When the mother of James and John expressed her desire for her sons to be given preeminence, Jesus instead stressed the principle of humility and service (Matthew 20:20-28). He taught the principle again as he addressed the spirit prevalent in the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:6-12). The apostle Paul, who had the credentials to be elevated to a lofty status in the church, stressed giving preference or showing deference to one another (Romans 12:10). The point is, we must not have the sort of selfish ambition found in Diotrephes, but rather the humble servant spirit found in Christ (cf. Philippians 2:2-8).

> "It is often the desire for preeminence that prompts Christians to reject apostolic teachings concerning brotherly relations..."

Diotrephes, in his quest to be number one, was willing to reject even the teaching and authority of an apostle. He rejected the apostolic authority of John himself. Does it not seem incredible that one would refuse to accept and submit to an apostle of Christ? But that is what happens when one's personal ambitions and desires for preeminence infect the heart. There was no room in

Diotrephes' heart for anyone when it came to matters of authority

In over thirty years of ministry I have seen my share of men and women like Diotrephes. Their desire to run the church, to assert their will, to have preeminence will motivate them to do ungodly and destructive things to the body of Christ. Some are like those about whom Paul warned the elders in the church at Ephesus in Acts 20:29-30. Like savage wolves they would arise from the eldership itself and rip the flock to shreds for one reason: to draw away disciples after themselves. They will have their way regardless of what it does to the flock because their authority, their judgment, their way is more important even that the unity of the church. They will do their best to take over and what they cannot control they will destroy for the sake of their own egos. Rather than "bending every effort" to maintain the spirit of unity in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3) they will bend and break whatever does not conform to their will, including the unity of the spirit. Having preeminence is more vital to them than the unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17:20-24).

The spirit of Diotrephes is alive and well in overzealous self-appointed "guardians of the faith" who castigate their brothers with whom they differ. It is often the desire for preeminence that prompts Christians to reject apostolic teachings concerning brotherly relations and to engage in malicious words to gain positions of influence. Paul warns about such in 2 Timothy 3:2-6. He says that they are lovers of themselves and are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over the weak. He instructs Timothy to have nothing to do with them.

Perhaps you have noticed the spirit of Diotrephes prancing about disguising preeminence as leadership when in reality it has to do with authority, supremacy and who is in control. One should be on guard against anyone who claims to have the best interest of the church in mind but who does the very thing that destroys unity, disrupts the peace of the flock and divides brothers and sisters while at the same time elevating his standing to one of being first. Have you spotted the spirit of Diotrephes recently? Be on guard against those who love attention, are not satisfied until they receive it, sulk when they cannot have it, love to be in control and want to be the leader by self-appointment.

Hosea

The book of Hosea is a timeless message about the nature of God's holy love. As the "husband," God's love for his bride is steadfast, but it is not without expectations. When those expectations are flaunted, God's love for his people endures, but it can also be tough. Our hope for our readers is that this issue of Carolina Christian will serve to increase your understanding of and appreciation for the steadfast love of God.

Hosea: A Prophet For All Seasons

Paul Watson

Imagine a nation in which there is economic abundance but also a wide, and widening, gap between rich and poor. Imagine that this country's national security is being threatened by a foreign power, leading that country to seek — with only partial success — support from other countries. Imagine further that, in spite of fairly regular church attendance and widespread public professions of faith, this nation's morality has declined dramatically — not only among its ordinary citizens but also among it business, its political, and even its religious leaders. Can you imagine such a country?

In the days of Hosea the prophet — approximately 752-722 B.C. — the nation of Israel fit this description perfectly. When Hosea began his prophetic ministry, Israel had been in existence for about 170 years and was enjoying peace and unprecedented prosperity under King Jeroboam II. By the end of Hosea's ministry, Israel's capital city, Samaria, and been destroyed by the Assyrians; its land had become a province of the Assyrian empire; and its people had either been killed or deported to other regions of Assyria. It was Hosea's God — given task to speak to his people throughout those troubled times — and to speak, through his preserved messages, to God's people forever after. Which is why Hosea is "a prophet for all seasons," including our own.

Hosea's recorded words stand at the beginning of the Book of the Twelve (the so-called "minor" prophets). His is the longest of these twelve books and, in many ways, sets the tone for the whole collection. Hosea's messages are sometimes hard to grasp in their specifics — partly because they come to us as poetry, not prose, and partly because the text of his messages has not been well preserved. Nevertheless, the thrust of Hosea's messages is very clear: Israel had wantonly disregarded her covenant with God, from first stipulation — "You shall have no other gods before me" — to last — "you shall not covet." This left God with no alternative but to punish his people for having severed their relationship with him. Such punishment would be unrelenting and inescapable, unless the people repented from their hearts. The renewal of their covenant with God was possible, but only by God's grace and because of his love for them.

The book of Hosea falls into three fairly distinct sections. The first section — chapters one through three — likens God's experience with Israel to Hosea's experience with Gomer, his wife. Both were terrible, sordid relationships. The husbands — Hosea, and God — were patient and willing to forgive the flagrant infidelity of their wives — Gomer, and Israel. But the wives persisted in their unfaithfulness, bringing shame and heartache not only to their spouses but also to their children. The only recourse — both for Hosea and for God — was to put away their wives, at least for a time, in the hope that they might eventually renew their marriages and that this time the wives would be faithful to them. One can only imagine the pain and shame that Hosea must have suffered by having his marital situation become a living metaphor for God's relationship with Israel. But one can also imagine how powerful, and how unmistakably clear, such a metaphor would have been — and still is.

The central section of the book of Hosea — chapters four through eleven — contains the bulk of Hosea's oracles, arranged in more-or-less chronological order. The first and last chapters of this section provide an excellent summary of the whole. In Hosea 4:1-3, God summons Israel to court, charging Israel with breach of covenant. The evidence to substantiate the charge is both negative and positive. On the one hand, among the people there was a total lack of reliability ("faithfulness"), of devotion ("steadfast love"), and personal relationship with God ("knowledge of God;" 4:1b). On the other hand, "cursing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery" were rampant (4:2a). There were no limits to the people's waywardness; their sins kept piling up, one on top of another (4:2b). The result of all this would be the total devastation, not only of the people, but also of the land itself — the good land given them by God (4:3).

The remainder of chapter four elaborates the widespread sin of the people. The priests and the prophets, who should have led the people in righteousness, were guilty themselves: "They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness" (4:8). The nation had given itself over to idolatry and infidelity, worshipping Ba'al in all the lewd ways his worship called for, instead of worshipping God. It would do the people no good to go to the worship centers of Israel and pretend to be loyal to Jehovah (4:15). For their monstrous unfaithfulness, all would be punished: "And it will be: Like people, like priests, I will punish both of them for their ways and repay them for their deeds" (4:9).

Chapters five through ten elaborate and reinforce the message of chapter four. Israel remained unfaithful to God (5:4-7). Neither their own leaders (7:1-7) nor foreign powers (5:13; 7:11) would be able to save Israel. The people had ignored God's prophets (9:7-9) while claiming to accept God (8:1-3). Israel's doom was sealed: "The days of punishment are coming, the days of reckoning are at hand. Let Israel know this" (9:7a).

Then comes chapter eleven, which concludes the central section of Hosea. It is one of the most beautiful, most haunting chapters of the entire Bible. In it the metaphor of marriage gives way to the metaphor of parent-child. God is Israel's father; Israel, God's prodigal son. In the first stanza (11:1-4), the tender, parenting love of God for Israel, his now wayward offspring, is achingly depicted: "When Israel was a child, I loved him . . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk . . . I lifted the yoke [of Egyptian bondage] from their necks and bent down to feed them." In the second stanza (11:5-7), Israel has become a rebellious adolescent, determined to leave home: "My people are determined to turn from me." Should they get into trouble and decide to call on God for help, he will not listen (11:7b).

Then comes stanza three (11:8-9), in which God reveals his own inner feelings as he struggles over what to do now with his rebellious child: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?" The answer is that God cannot totally, finally abandon his offspring, no matter how disobedient they have been: "My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man — the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath." Instead — stanza four (11:10-11)-God will roar like a daddy-lion, and "his children will come trembling from the west" and "I will settle them in their homes, declares the Lord." God's love will win out over human sin, no matter what, no matter what.

The final section of Hosea — chapters twelve through fourteen — recapitulate the messages of Israel's continued idolatry (13:1-3) and consequent punishment by God (12:2); of the option still available to Israel to repent (14:1-3); and of God's final healing grace (14:4-8). Hosea did not live to see that last promise fulfilled. But the gospel writer, using Hosea's own words, says that it was: "So he [Joseph] got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son'." (Matthew 2:14-15, quoting Hosea 11:1).

Paul Watson serves the Cole Mill Rd. church in Durham, NC as preacher and elder. He can be contacted at 1617 Cole Mill Rd., Durham, NC 27705.

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Urgent Need!

There's Something in a Name (Hosea 1:1-2:1)

Ken Chaffin

This passage is about sin and redemption. God uses the life of the prophet Hosea in order to bring his message home to his people. Sometimes, when evil has such sway in life, shock is the only way to get lessons to stick. So, Hosea is ordered to marry a prostitute?and not a reformed prostitute either, but one who was still engaging in her sinful activities. God told Hosea to do this because he himself feels that in marrying Israel he has done the same thing?attached himself to an unfaithful partner. By this provocative life lesson, God intended to show his faithless bride, Israel, that she was nothing more than a fickle, shallow mercenary wife and deserved any punishment that God placed upon her.

By the way, Israel's faithlessness had multiple factors. Eighth century Israel was a sinful stew of rebelliousness toward God. In every way, God's people had played him false:

o In religion, with other gods and other faiths.

o In politics, with shabby alliances and doubtful allies.

o In morals, with gratuitous sex and violence.

God should probably have written Israel off, save one important factor: he still loved her. Consequently, he wanted to redeem Israel.

First, however, it would be necessary for Israel to learn more life lessons, so again Hosea's real life is used as an example. Israel needed to understand how wrong she had been and how God was totally displeased with her actions. God chose to tell his story by way of the names of Gomer's children: Jezreel (Hosea's son), Lo-ruhumah (a daughter), and Lo-ami (a second son). These last two children do not appear to have been Hosea's (nuances in the original Hebrew indicate this) and therefore contribute to the story of Gomer's harlotry (and, by metaphor, Israel's harlotry as well).

Names are important in ancient near-eastern culture. God used various names in the Old Testament to reveal much about himseself. Now, in Hosea, he used the names of Gomer's children to preach a message to his unfaithful wife, Israel.

The name of the first boy is Jezreel, a reference to a well-known town and valley in the northern kingdom of Israel. An otherwise reasonably righteous king of Israel (one of the few), Jehu had violently created a massacre at Jezreel some years before in going too far in carrying out a commission by God. The story is told in 2 kings 9 and 10. The northern kingdom never recovered and was on a downhill slide from that point on, until it was eventually destroyed by the Assyrian empire. To name a child Jezreel would be like naming a child Pearl Harbor today. It sent a message about Israel's sin, her proclivity for violence and political betrayal. Jezreel meant that Israel was cruel and savage.

The girl child's name was Lo-rehuman, which means "not pitied." This obviously would not be a regular choice of name. Yahweh even explained it for us. God will no longer pity or have compassion (cf. Isaiah 49:15) on Israel; however, Judah still remained in his possible grace. This symbolic name portends even more than Jezreel, for it was bad enough to lose a war and thus a kingdom (Israel), but it was so much worse to consider that you might be beyond the mercy of God. There would be a reprieve for Judah in the form of a miraculous deliverance (Isaiah 37:14, 33ff), but there would be no pity for impenitent Samaria (the capital of Israel).

The name of the third child, Lo-ami, extended the terror. "You are not my child" is what God was saying (Hosea, literally, as well) to Israel. To be the people of God, then to literally be called "Not my people," would have been a devastating blow. The opposite is then just as true. Yahweh was not their God.

"What began as a note of heavy judgment with the naming of these children ends with an incredible word of possibility and promise."

These symbolic names offered in judgment on the nation of Israel were warnings that would be fulfilled upon the nation. Shortly, Samaria, would fall. Shortly, Israel would be punished for her own blood lust and she would fall from the mercy of God and lose her status as the people of God. Sin is devastating, ruining everything. The course of history and theology is changed. Nations win or lose. Lives and fortunes are lost.

God's love is removed. Sin is dangerous business.

At the same time, God did offer Judah a chance to repent and be reclaimed. All is not lost to humble, penitent prodigals who return to their first love, God, and earnestly seek His ways.

The possibility of hope was there. The great love of God can make Jezreel a peaceful place. To those to whom he had said, "No mercy," he would offer mercy. To those to whom he had said, "not my people," He would say, "Son's of the living God." Both Paul and Peter used this passage to say God's kingdom is open to anyone (Jew, Gentile, etc.). What began as a note of heavy judgment with the naming of these children ends with an incredible word of possibility and promise. The New Testament offers Jesus as the way out of this predicament (cf. John 11:24-25) (John 11:24-25), and we know, "There's just something about that name."

Ken Chaffin preaches for the North Raleigh Church of Christ. He can be contacted at 8701 Falls of Neuse, Raleigh, NC 27615.

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What God Wants (Hosea 6:1-6)

Mark Banks

It's strange, though not as strange as it should be, that sometimes the most religious of people are the coldest in their regard for others. Isn't our devotion to God supposed to result in kindness to others rather than leading us to regard them with contempt or callous indifference? Though it has been several years ago, it is still with some pain that I recall being invited to preach a series of sermons to a congregation for which I had formerly been a minister. After two sermons I was approached by the leaders of the congregation and informed that I had already been replaced. Ouch. (O.K., so my preaching wasn't that great. But in my totally unbiased opinion, it didn't warrant that kind of abrupt dismissal!) I now realize that the intense rejection and humiliation I felt then was an overreaction. After all, I still had others, especially my wife, who loved me and accepted me.

God, in Hosea's day, could not make that consoling claim. God's bride — the people of Israel — had summarily dismissed him. God, who had lavished his bride with the best gifts of his love, waited in vain for her to love him in return: "Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. A spirit of prostitution is in their heart; they do not acknowledge their God" (Hosea 5:4). God was hurting. God felt pain because his people had forgotten him. They didn't know him anymore, though oddly enough it appears they wouldn't dream of missing a worship service in his honor (Hosea 5:6)!

God's pain also came from the way his people treated one another. Since they didn't know their God anymore, they had forgotten how much God loved people and how he demanded that they be treated right.

God had been jilted. His people were sin-sick, yet they would not allow their Great Physician to heal them. Because of their covenant-breaking, God would exact the promised punishment via the invading Assyrian army, in the hope that his people would turn their hearts back to him so he could heal them (Hosea 5:13-15).

The punishment seemed to have worked! When life became painful, they were ready for a change. "Let's go back to God!," they said. "We'll get to know him again!" they promised one another. "Our God is faithful to heal us!" they cried. "Our lives will be wonderful again!," they claimed with confidence (Hosea 6:1-3). But God didn't buy it. Why not? What does God want? "I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6).

The people turned to God because they were in a bind, not because they were ready to change or because they really wanted to be close to him. Theirs was a crisis religion. Their religion turned them to God in tough times — crisis times — but returned them to their own desires the rest of the time. When my brother and I were young, sometimes we got into trouble for fighting each other. On one such occasion, our punishment was that we were not allowed to go to an event that we really wanted to attend. So we staged a loud apology to each other within earshot of our parents, waited a while, and then asked if we were still grounded. Of course we were! Were my brother and I really sorry for hurting each other? Of course not, as many later interactions would prove. Besides, the issue for us at the time wasn't our relationship with each other; it was to be free to go our merry way. Likewise, God's people really hadn't returned to God at all. What God wanted was their devotion (to "know" him) and their merciful treatment of others always.

Jesus, in quoting Hosea 6:6 to the religious people of his day, reminded them (and us) that God still wants mercy and a real knowledge of him. When might Christians of today need this reminder?

We need a reminder of what God desires when we become so preoccupied with "church matters" that our neighbors are forgotten.

It can happen: We become so busy with ministries and worship services and all the other programmatic concerns of our congregations — all good things — that somehow we neglect to care for people who need our help. Christians can go about "doing the Lord's work" yet fail to be with those with whom the Lord is working! In view of the merciful God we serve, forgetting to care for others is as unthinkable as violence toward them (see Luke 16:19-31). The mercy of God takes precedence, so that all church work is seen in that light. God wants us to be truly human as Jesus was.

I owe my parents a great deal of gratitude for modeling an appropriate dedication to our congregation and its ministries without forgetting to be merciful. For example, on one occasion our family was traveling in our car when we spotted an acquaintance walking beside the highway. This acquaintance, Lacy, was an unusual fellow. He had no car, so he walked until someone gave him a ride. I'd even seen him traveling down the highway crouched and clinging to the back of a riding lawnmower. By the good graces of the land owner, Lacy and his wife lived in a renovated chicken house. Lacy earned his keep by cutting brush off fence rows with his double-bit ax. Apparently there was no running water in their humble dwelling, because often you could catch a whiff of Lacy before he even came into view.

On this day, it was raining. I couldn't believe it when my dad slowed and pulled over to give Lacy a ride. We would be late. And, of course, a dripping wet Lacy would sit on the cloth-covered back seat beside me. But we gave him a ride that day anyway. Even months later, on humid days I would be reminded of Lacy as his trademark scent lingered. And I would also be reminded of mercy.

We need a reminder of what God desires when our devotion to him is reduced to keeping regulations.

When God's people offer worship that is an expression of their love for their Savior, God is very pleased. In fact, God has given us guidance in his Word for some specific actions that please him. But when religion is reduced to keeping the letter of the law, warmth for God and people is lost (2 Corinthians 3:6). God desires that we rejoice in his companionship. He is delighted when we talk to him, not just about him. He wants us to love him for who he is and for the amazing things that he has done for us. We have his heart; he wants ours.

Sometimes it's unclear what we should do. Do I keep this job or look for another? Should I stay single or should I marry? Which missionaries should we partner with? God might give us specific direction in these and other similar areas. Or, maybe God would say, "You are my faithful child and you please me. I delight in letting you decide. What do you want to do?" In any case, as we ponder such questions, we know what God does desire — that we acknowledge him and that we show mercy. And he gives us the grace to live that way. Praise him for that!

Mark Banks serves the Cole Mill Rd. church and can be contacted at 1617 Cole Mill Rd., Durham, NC 27705.

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Undivided Hearts

Bob Mason

Entertainers charm us with smooth words and songs, gathering large crowds of cheering fans. Hosea, as a prophet of God, brought the people of Israel a more valuable gift — the truth about their lives and their future.

The people of the ten northern tribes of Israel prospered in material goods; and, in response, they dedicated a portion of their wealth to spiritual worship. Hosea says, "...he [Israel] built more altars...he adorned his sacred stones," (10:1)

> "...Our devotion to God should make us good stewards of our daily blessings."

But Hosea foretells the Lord's destruction of both the altars and the sacred stones. The golden calf revered by Israel will be carried to Assyria, and no king could save the people. In the end, "When I please, I will punish them; nations will be gathered against them to put them in bonds for their double sin" (10:10). What had gone so terribly wrong between their good intentions with their prosperity and their humiliating end?

Hosea points directly to their hearts as the root of all the problems (10:2). He describes their heart problem with a Hebrew word that has two meanings, and both seem to apply to Israel's condition. He uses the word most often translated "divided," as in dividing land among tribes, or dividing the spoils of war. The hearts of the Israelites were divided. God did not reject sincere devotion, but he did reject worship that was divided between him and idols. Their divided hearts, dating back to the terrible rape and murder committed in Gibeah (Judges 19), split the people between righteousness and sin. They were turning one face toward God and another toward the world.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, expresses the impossibility of this lifestyle: "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money," (Matthew 6:24). The word describing their heart is also translated "smooth," such as, "The words of his mouth were smoother than butter..." (Psalms 55:21). Hearts that produced smooth, deceitful, and insincere words were also the

The God of All Grace (Hosea 14:1-8)

Amos Allen

Heidi was a beautiful dog. A shiny copper coat showed off her powerful muscles. She was a Rottweiler-Rhodesian ridgeback mix, which contributed to her fearless personality. She was strong, proud and beautiful.

One thing Heidi enjoyed was running. When I went jogging or to play golf, she wanted to go. It was fun to watch her. I enjoyed owning such a

(continued on next page)

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downfall of Israel.

Hosea says that they "...make many promises, take false oaths, and make agreements; therefore lawsuits spring up like poisonous weeds in a plowed field," (10:4). The implication is that those words were empty, that they carried no conviction. But smooth words were convenient, even if the people had no intention of honoring them. When times changed, they could go back on their word and forget their promises.

Our challenge today is to recognize that, while our modern world is very different from the dusty streets of ancient Israel, we face the same dangers. We must avoid that same disaster that took away Israel's prosperity and assigned them to foreign bondage. Satan still uses the trap of devotion to modern material things to divide our devotion to God. Rather, our devotion to God should make us good stewards of our daily blessings.

We have to avoid the deceit and dishonesty that enable "smooth" words and ways to blend us with the corrupt side of society. Otherwise, we will become partakers in our society's ruined morals and lack of righteousness, and that will condemn us to destruction. The deceit and empty words that condemned Israel can pull us down into the quagmire of false relationships and immorality that is accepted as a way of life by many modern people.

Our blessings and wealth from God's hand are great, as is our desire to worship God. Through Jesus, we find those precious words that direct us into obedience to the perfect will of a loving God in heaven, who awaits our arrival.

Bob Mason can be contacted at P.O. Box 1176, Aberdeen, NC 28315.

(The God of All Grace continued) magnificent animal.

Another thing Heidi enjoyed was running around. At night. In the neighborhood, when she was supposed to be guarding us. She would return from these escapades caked with mud, scratched, and even bloody. Then, she would sleep through the day, exhausted from the night's adventures.

Every day I would repair holes she made in or under the fence. I did everything I could to convince her to stay, but she would have none of it. So, every morning I would go looking for her, calling, hoping she had not been poisoned or stolen. She liked running around.

The pain and the punishment for her jaunts did not make a difference to her. I eventually gave her away. As much as I enjoyed her, I could not tolerate this behavior.

In Hosea's day, Israel behaved toward God like my dog treated me. And God responded to Israel like I did to Heidi. Enough was enough. "The people of Samaria must bear their guilt, because they have rebelled against their God. They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open." (Hosea 13:16)

Israel's punishment for blatant, persistent sin was gruesome. How they were punished is not as important as why. The people rejected Yahweh God in their politics, military, economy and religion. Idolatry defined them. And they would not quit — so God punished them.

Punishment, though, is not the last word with the One Who Makes Covenants. Just as Israel was originally chosen for blessings, so Israel would be rescued and revived. Chapter fourteen of Hosea is the last word on God's punishment of Israel: I will heal their waywardness and love them freely (Hosea 14:4a). The good news for Israel is that God forgives.

Before (or as) God restores, there is a clear call for the people to repent: Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God (Hosea 14:1). The covenant says that God will bless the faithful and obedient, but that he will curse the willful rebels. And when the rebels repent, God will bless them again.

Hosea gives the Israelites some suggestions as to what to say when they are ready to come back to Yahweh: a) "forgive our sins," b) "receive us with goodness," and c) "we offer deeds that match our words" (Hosea 14:2). They are not to approach God with sacrifices, as they might have expected, but only with words of humility and good deeds.

There is more to the "formula" (Hosea 14:3a): "Assyria (foreign powers) cannot help us," b) "military power cannot help us," and c) "idols cannot help us." Israel must recognize that her trust in shrewd diplomacy, military might, and man-made idols is not only worthless but offensive to God Almighty. Idolatry, by any other name, is heinous.

This section concludes with an appeal to God to remember his compassion toward orphans. God promotes himself as a defender of the helpless (Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 146:9) and the people need to see themselves as needy, not self-sufficient. This attitude, when coupled with God's sensitivity to the weak, opens the door for them to come back into the land and and enjoy once again the goodness of the LORD.

Hosea urges the people to repent in light of their many sins and their persistence in doing them. If they will, God will restore his blessings. (In this instance the blessings will be future, not immediate, because time is up for the Northern Kingdom.) If they will return to God, the blessings will be many and glorious (14:5-7). One interesting note in Hosea 14:6 is that not only will Israel look good, but will also smell good.

We understand that repenting is both a one-time event and an ongoing process. We turn our lives toward God at some definite point in time. We keep turning (back) toward God on a regular basis as he reveals our sins and misperceptions.

Some sins have deep, tangled roots in our hearts and minds, resisting our best efforts to get rid of them. You know what I am talking about. We do not like what we do or think or say, but we keep on. We have begged God for forgiveness seventy times seven, and asked for help, but sin hangs on. An honest tuning back again and again is a good thing to do. What is scary is when sin no longer makes me feel bad. That is what happened to Israel; they lost the desire to return to their Creator.

Repentance is a gift from God. Being able to return is wonderful. Once or twice, my wife and I have had a serious disagreement. The tension feels terrible. And few things feel better than restoring the relationship. But what kind of God allows the wicked and rebellious to come back? Jesus expresses it well in his story of the prodigal son and the forgiving father (Luke 15) — a gracious One.

Amos Allen preaches for the Trindale Church of Christ. He can be contacted at 1755 Rocky Lane, Asheboro, NC 27203.

Real Men Love Their Wives As Christ Loves His Church

Russ Jurek

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless..." (Ephesians 5:25-33).

The sign in the sporting goods store read, "Wanted: Woman seeking to marry an outdoorsman. Should enjoy fishing, hiking and hunting. Interest in bird hunting is a plus. Must have own shotgun and bird dog. Must be able to clean and cook wild birds. Send picture of gun and dog."

If you just thought, "Good ad, why didn't I think of that?" you and I need to talk! Unfortunately, many men read Ephesians 5:22-24 as Biblical evidence for their being "King of their castle" thereby giving

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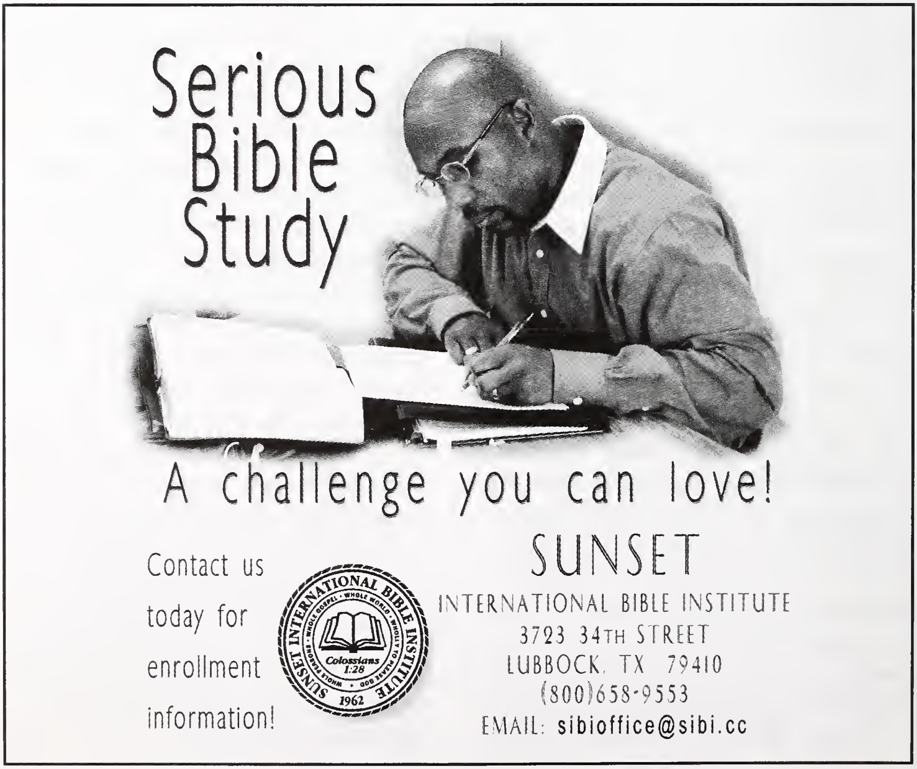

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Bless You!

David Kneip

Someone sneezes across the room. What do we say? "Bless you." When you want to insult someone blatantly, but still do it nicely, we say, "Bless his heart, that boy is as dumb as a post (or whatever)." But then, when we go to church, we ask God to "bless" people.

Now, obviously, we sometimes use "church words" for things that aren't very holy, but I also think that there are connections between the ways we use the word "bless." If we define "to bless" very loosely as "to wish someone well," it can work. If they're sick, we want them to be well. If someone's having a hard day — "bless your heart!" And that's where blessing is something different for us as Christians. We don't just "wish" that things can go better for people, right? We believe that God can change people's lives, sometimes even using us. In other words, we believe that in saying the words, "May God bless you," we believe that something might actually happen.

OK. That's a little weird, isn't it? Just by saying words, things happen? We aren't magicians, are we? There are a couple of stories in the Bible that may help us understand this, namely, the stories of Isaac blessing Jacob in Genesis 27, and then Jacob blessing his descendants in Genesis 48-49.

A key bit of knowledge you need in understanding these stories is that the ancient Hebrews, like the people who lived around them, believed that when you bless somebody, they really get blessed. The same goes the other way around — when you curse someone, they're really cursed.

Maybe the best analogy we have in our world is when someone gets married. When the minister says, "I now PRONOUNCE you man and wife," everyone agrees that they're now man and wife. All he did was say something, but we believe that those words have power.

This is why the aftermath of Jacob's tricking of Isaac is so troubling. Isaac, violently trembling, has given the blessing away, and he can't get it back, nor can he give another one. And later, Joseph knows that once Jacob blesses his boys, even though he's kind of doing it "backwards," he can't change his mind, so he wants to make sure that the blesser has got it right!

In my opinion, this understanding helps make clear passages like Deuteronomy 30, in which Moses tells the people that he has set before them "blessings and curses" (vv. 1, 19). He has set real things out for them to take hold of; their actions and decisions really will affect the future. This is also why Psalm 10:3 is so scary for the Psalm-writer. Only a wicked person would want to "bless" the greedy, for who would want to cause well-being to happen for someone who is taking from others? Finally, this may change the way we view the Beatitudes in Matthew 5?does Jesus mean that they really are blessed, these poor in spirit and mourners, that God really is smiling on them? I think so!

My friends, this is a door of opportunity for us, in terms of changing our worlds. God told Abraham in Genesis 12:2 that he would bless him, but he also said that Abraham would "be a blessing." Later on, Jesus instructed his disciples to love their enemies, to do good to those who hated them, to pray for those who mistreated them, and to bless those who cursed them (Luke 6:27-28). Finally, Paul told the church in Rome to bless the ones who were persecuting them, to bless and not curse (Romans 12:14). In other words, the word to God's people to bless those around them is both ancient and new. It has always been a part of being a child of God. And if we believe that blessing someone really does make something happen, then that gives us all kinds of confidence that the things we do can change the world.

All of this means that the things your parents, youth ministers, preachers, and other friends at church encourage you to do aren't just nice words. Praying for others, encouraging them, comforting them, telling them about God aren't just good things to do — they actually bring them closer to the well-being that God wants for all of us as we live together in the world.

Remember that the next time you have the opportunity to bless someone. I encourage you to take it!

(Real Men continued)

them excuse to dominate their wives. Paying little attention to verses 25-33, they don't seem to grasp the concept of loving their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

I sat in my office the other day listening to a husband complain about his marriage. He wasn't happy with his wife any more because she wasn't giving him and doing for him all the things he wanted from her. He couldn't see why, since he was the head of the house, he didn't get to do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. After work, he would come home, eat dinner, watch a little TV and spend the rest of his

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How Does Our Relationship To God Transform Us? (Part 1)

David French

To know God is to become like God. As we come to know God more intimately and more thoroughly, His nature begins to transform who we are and how we live our lives. Just as two married individuals influence each other over time, so an intimate relationship with God influences and changes our character over time. But exactly what, then, do we learn about God (as we come to know Him more intimately) that reshapes our lives?

There are only a handful of passages in the Bible that attempt to define God's nature and those that do all say basically the same thing. When God passed before Moses, his nature was proclaimed as, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps his lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin" (Exodus 34:5-7). John tells us several times that God is love. In fact, he asserts "one who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). Jeremiah instructs us that, instead of seeking after wisdom, strength and wealth, we should seek after an understanding and knowledge of God?specifically that God is a God of lovingkindness, justice and righteousness (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

In addition to these verses are those that instruct us as to what God longs to see among his people. "Depart from evil and do good...for the Lord loves justice" (Psalm 37:28). "The Lord longs to be gracious to you," Isaiah writes, "for the Lord is a God of justice" (Isaiah 30:17). The Psalmist calls on men to praise God for, "He loves righteousness and justice..." (33:1-5). Several psalms repeat the phrase, "righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne" (89:10; 97:2). Psalm 111 proclaims that "the Lord is gracious and compassionate" and that "the works of His hands are truth and justice." In Psalm 140, the Psalmist declares that "the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted and justice for the poor" (140:9). Key words, then, that keep appearing in these passages are the words love (lovingkindness), grace, justice and righteousness.

We can also gain insight into the nature of God from those passages that describe and explain his behavior. A careful study of Genesis 6 and 18 identifies the primary reason for God's destruction of the world by flood and of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was due to the violence and injustice that God saw. Sexual immorality was only part of a much larger problem. Likewise we are told that God's redemption of Israel from Egypt in the exodus was also prompted by the oppression and injustice that God saw. The same explanation stands behind the prophetic judgments against Israel and her neighbors throughout the Prophets.

This is why Job proclaims that God "delivers the afflicted in their affliction, and opens his ear in time of oppression" (Job 36:15). And, it's why the Psalmist declares that God "will deliver the needy when he cries for help... and rescue their life from oppression and violence" because "their blood is precious in his sight" (Psalm 72:11-14). A study of God's intervention in human history makes it clear that what moves God to intervene in human affairs is the violence, oppression and injustice that He sees, especially when it is against the poor and powerless of the world.

It is at this point that we begin to notice a most interesting coupling of the terms justice and righteousness. The term "justice" appears more than 135 times in the Old Testament; and yet, 48 times (near 40 percent) the term is coupled with the word "righteousness," indicating that the terms are used nearly synonymously with each other (something the context also demonstrates). This, then, gives us a somewhat different meaning of the word "righteousness." Righteousness must have something to do with justice and how one treats his neighbor. Our tendency, however, has been to define righteousness in a more restrictive sense: as having to do with one's faithful obedience of God's moral law and proper religious adherence. Of course, the heart of God's law is about loving one's neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:39; John 13:34-35; 14:15; 1 John 3:13-24).

Of obvious significance is the statement of God's intent for Abraham and his children as it appears just prior to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:17-21). God explains that He needs to inform Abraham about what He is about to do against the injustice and violence of Sodom and Gomorrah. The reason is that He has chosen Abraham and his children after him "to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice." Clearly, the writer of Genesis wants to contrast two different groups: the people of Sodom (who are characterized by injustice and violence) and the people of God (who are to be characterized by righteousness and justice). In other words, this was God's intent for His people (then, as well as, now): that they be a people of justice and righteousness.

Third, we can come to know God more intimately through His commandments. Behind the law stands the Lawgiver. God's laws and commandments reflect God's own nature and concerns. So, what do God's commandments reveal about himself? Perhaps it was Jesus himself who summarized the heart and essence of God's laws when he answered the scribe that the greatest two commandments were to love the Lord with all your being and to love your neighbor as yourself. Then he added, "On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus' words define for us the essence and heart of all God's commandments. There are two dimensions to God's law: the vertical and horizontal. Of the ten commandments, the first four focus on the vertical (our relationship to God). The last six address the horizontal dimension (our behavior toward others). However, what is even more important to realize is the intricate link between the two. Our relationship with God affects our relationship to others, and our relationship to others affects our relationship to God. In other words, our relationship with God will transform the way we treat others (1 John 4:21), namely with love and justice; and our relationship with others will either enhance or hinder our relationship to God (Matthew 5:23-24; 1 John 4:20).

A careful study of God's commandments throughout the Bible demonstrates that the primary intent of God's laws was to teach and reinforce the ethic of love and justice. Space will not permit a thorough demonstration of this fact, but a few examples reveal the basic sentiment of God's law. In Exodus 23, God's people were warned not to bear false report against another, to do anything that perverted justice, to take a bribe, or to oppress foreigners (23:1-9). The leaders of Israel were also warned not to distort justice, to take a bribe, or to be partial in governing?"justice, and only justice, shall you pursue." (Deuteronomy 16:18-20). We are told in Proverbs that "a false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight" (Proverbs 11:1). The same instructions are repeated throughout the Psalms. Leaders are commanded to "vindicate the weak and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and destitute...rescue the weak and needy, and deliver them out of the hand of the wicked" (82:1-4). "How blessed are those who keep justice; who practice righteousness at all times" (106:1-3).

Perhaps nowhere it is stated more simply than by Micah the Prophet. The people were frustrated that God was not answering their prayers and they were confused as to what it would take to please God (a thousand sacrificed rams or calves, human sacrifice?). In response, Micah prophesied, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" That's it in a nutshell. What God desires most of us is justice and mercy (love) in our treatment of others.

Fourth, we can understand the nature of God by considering God's judgments against wrongdoers. We have already mentioned that God's judgment against Sodom was due to the violence and injustice that characterized those cities of the plain. More significant are the prophetic condemnations against nations by the Prophets, especially those against God's own people. Consider the prophesy of Isaiah 58. The people of Judah were confused as to why God was not answering their prayers for deliverance. Isaiah explains to them that God will not listen to them when their nation is full of such injustice and oppression. In fact, Isaiah tells them, the religion they practice is a false religion; for the religion that God wants to see is that which moves them "to loose the chains of injustice…to set free the oppressed…to share your food with the hungry…to provide shelter for the poor wanderer…and to clothe the naked…" (58:1-10).

Isaiah even go so far as to refer to them as "leaders of Sodom and Gomorrah," a reference that only makes sense if we understand that the chief sin of Sodom was injustice and oppression (Isaiah 1:10). Even more disturbing is Isaiah's pronouncements that God hates their worship and sacrificing: "Who requires this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me…" (1:10-17). Instead, God instructs them, "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, confront the oppressors, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:17). "Woe to those…who issue unjust decisions so as to deprive the needy of justice…" (10:1-2).

Likewise Amos preaches the same message, condemning those who "turn justice into a wormwood" (5:6-24). He urges them, "Hate evil, love good, and establish justice in the gate" (5:14-15). Amos also declares just how deeply God hates their worship and sacrifices. "I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies… I will not accept them… take away the noise of your songs... but let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (5:16-24). The same scathing reproach is echoed throughout the prophets (Habbakuk 1:1-4; Zechariah 7:9-10, Obadiah, etc). At the heart of God's judgments against nations is God's hatred of injustice and oppression. Nations and cities, even God's people, are destroyed for their lack of love and justice.

God's intent in raising up a new people out of Abraham was so that they would be an example and an influence for justice and righteousness on earth (Genesis 12:3; 18:19). Israel was to be a holy people, different from the rest of humanity, a reflection of God's own nature. In this way Israel would become an influence for justice and righteousness in a world full of violence and oppression.

What then does this tell us about the nature and purpose of the church today in a world full of violence and oppression? What implications does this have for us in defining the mission of the church and the focus of our ministry? What does it mean today to be the people of God? In the second part of this article (next issue), we will try to answer these questions and consider the implications this has for the church today.

* * *

(Real Men continued)
evening on the computer. He spent most of his weekends with his buddies hunting, fishing, working on cars, etc.

Our families are in trouble mostly because too many of our husbands and fathers are leaving their families because they are not getting what THEY want. Many of those staying are so preoccupied with themselves, they are neglecting their mates and children. What is the real problem? Husbands who aren't loving their wives as Christ loved his church and gave himself up for her.

If you are a husband or are planning to be in the future, take a good hard look at what it takes! Jesus loved his church so much, he died on a cross for her. He gave up what he wanted "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39). So the church would be radiant, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. I'll say to you as I did to the husband in my office the other day, You want a better wife? Be a husband who loves his wife the way Christ loved his church, give yourself up for her, and you will have her!

ICOC Leaders Apologize to Church Members

Editor's Note: For many years the International Churches of Christ, under the leadership of Kip McKean, have disavowed any connection with the "mainstream" churches of Christ. During that time they have garnered much national media attention for their evangelistic and discipling practices, being viewed by many as a cult. The following letter was read to the Los Angeles Church of Christ, the headquarters of the ICOC, on February 28 and has been posted on their website. Hopefully, it may represent a significant step toward reconciliation with other churches of Christ. More importantly, let us pray that it represents the beginning of a return to a more biblical foundation.

An Apology to the Christians of the Los Angeles Church of Christ. From The LA Elders, Super Regional and Regional Evangelists and Women's' Ministry Leaders

"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all," (Ephesians 4:1-6).

In 1989, a small group of disciples started the Los Angeles Church of Christ with a dream of being able "to win as many as possible" (1 Corinthians 9:19). Since that time, we have seen the Lord do amazing things, not only here in LA, but also in the churches that LA planted, such as Moscow and Vietnam. We are incredibly thankful for the sacrifices of so many churches and individuals who together have made that dream in Los Angeles become a reality.

God has also disciplined us. In November 2001, after receiving counsel from several elders and evangelists, Kip McKean resigned as the leader of the LA Church. At that time, a significant change in the leadership structure took place. Rather than being led by one individual, a team of evangelists and elders began working together side by side with their wives to lead the LA church. This decision was made out of a growing conviction that a functioning leadership team was the Biblical model for a mature church.

As soon as the new leadership was in place, two changes were made in January of 2002. First, statistics ceased to be used to motivate and inspire. The use of numbers had caused some to be boastful, proud, manipulative, abusive and deceitful, and others to feel completely defeated and discouraged. We apologize to any of you who were made to feel that way. Secondly, to alter the need for ever-increasing special contributions, serious efforts were made to reduce our spending to the level that the disciples were actually willing to give in their weekly contributions. Staffs were cut by more than 20 percent, responsible budgets were created, and significant efforts were made to increase the efficiency of the remaining administrative and ministry staff.

Over the last 15 months, many things have had a deep impact on us?including the articles and lessons of several teachers, evangelists and elders that were preached, taught, published, mailed and e-mailed as well as many conversations and correspondence with other members of the church. This input has helped us to develop deeper realizations of needed changes and a godly sorrow for our sins. These understandings have also come about through much prayer, study, reflection, soul-searching and discussions with many others inside and outside the LA Church. We are thankful for each of the honest and direct talks which we have had with so many, both from the paid and non-paid ministry. They have been invaluable. Recently the LA consensus group, the region evangelists, elders, and several non-staff people met together to listen to one another and come to some very definitive convictions. We want to share our convictions of ways that we have sinned against you and others:

(1) Arrogance in the staff (Matthew 20:25-28)

We have allowed a tremendous gulf to develop in many parts of the church between those in the paid ministry and those who are not. This gap has occurred because too often we have been difficult to approach, question, challenge and correct. Not only have we not solicited input and listened enough, but we have not encouraged the rest of the staff to do so either. We have not valued and respected the tremendous gifts and talents of the majority of you, our brothers and sisters. Also, at times more grace was extended to leaders in dealing with their faults and sins than to everyone else in direct opposition to James 3:1. This was disrespectful, prideful, and arrogant. To bridge the gap, advisory groups composed of non-paid disciples are being organized in every region. We believe there must be more accountability of the lives and compensation of the paid staff as well as more involvement of mature non-staff members in setting policy and the budgets of the church. Deacons need to be selected in every region to provide greater financial oversight of the church as well as to identify and meet spiritual needs in the church. We are urging these to be in place as soon as possible, certainly in the next few months.

(2) Weakening other churches (Philippians 2:3-4)

We tolerated and, in some cases, participated in calling for people and money to be sent from other churches to strengthen the LA church, regardless of the weakening effect on the sending church. This was incredibly selfish and wrong. We want to become known as a "giving" church rather than a "taking" church.

(3) Giving Through Compulsion (2 Corinthians 9: 6-8)

Rather than appealing to you to give financially from your hearts and from the overflow of your love for God, we too often made you feel compelled and coerced to give a required amount, both in the weekly as well as the special contributions. This is completely against the teachings of the New Testament concerning giving and offerings and prevented many of you from giving cheerfully. The sin was compounded by what were at times unreasonable budget increases that should have been prevented by better planning. We are thankful for all of you who have had good and generous hearts through your many years as disciples in spite of these things.

(4) Authoritarian Discipling (Ephesians 5:21)

We participated in an authoritarian discipling structure where advice was too often perceived as command. Some felt controlled and manipulated. This was abusive and sinful. We have not been servant leaders and apologize for allowing power to be abused at the top leadership levels. We realize this spirit and environment influenced even the youngest of Christians.
Although we definitely believe in Biblical discipling relationships and the need to be involved in each others' lives, as taught in the many "one another" verses, many relationships need to be redefined so that they are filled with mutual trust, honesty, humility and approachability.

(5) Improper Teaching of the One True Church (Ephesians 4:1-7; 1 Corinthians 12:13)

We realize that our teaching of the

one true church has come across as exclusive and arrogant. Although some of this was addressed by Kip two years ago at our "Jubilee," we have been too slow in making sure that the teaching was adequately changed. We do need to teach the "one way to salvation" as taught in the Bible, and let God determine who is in his one universal church. More thorough teaching on this will be in the near future.

(6) Not Emphasizing the Greatest Commandments (Matthew 22:37-40)

Too many times converting others to Christ was almost the only measure of a disciple's spirituality. Making disciples was emphasized far more than loving God with your whole heart. Fruitfulness is certainly an outgrowth of our love for God and continued growth as a Christian (2 Peter 1:5-9), but our unbalanced emphasis has discouraged and defeated some to the point that they felt worthless as Christians. This was sinful and wrong. Although winning the lost will always be an expected commitment of Christ and His church (Matthew 28:18-20), we will also be just as committed to loving God and one another and strive to have a more Biblical and complete understanding of spirituality

(7) Not Fulfilling the Role of the Elders (1 Peter 5:1-4)

The authority of the elders was not recognized, and so consequently they had very little influence over decisions, even though they are expected by God to be the overseers of the church (Acts 20:28). To our shame, we served as evangelists and elders and yet allowed this to happen. We have repented, and the church now functions with a consensus leadership group of elders and evangelists with the elders in an oversight role. Our goal is to train, raise up, and appoint more elders (particularly from the non-paid membership) to shepherd the congregation and each region of the LA church.

(8) Abusive Accountability (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Too much of our accountability became abusive. The accountability exercised by many concerning commitments to Men's Days, Women's Days, church services, giving and other activities and events was excessive and demeaning. There was no excuse for any of us applying accountability in this way. This strict accountability fostered a reliance on human wisdom and works instead of a motivation to serve due to the appreciation of God's saving grace through faith.

(9) Not Teaching the Bible in

Depth (Hebrews 5:11-6:3)
We have not seen to it that the staff has been trained in the Bible as they should and that the flock has been fed the Scriptures in depth. Too often sermons and midweek lessons have left our members hungry. While all Christians have responsibility for their own walk with God and knowledge of the Scriptures, we need to inspire and lead them to the Word.

(10) Discouraging Older Disciples (Ephesians 4:11-16)
As the church has grown and our members have grown older, our leadership has not matured to meet the needs of those who have been disciples for several years. Many of the sins listed above have led many of the older disciples to feel discounted, disrespected, discouraged and disheartened. We deeply apologize and ask for help in finding new ways to utilize the incredible experience of the long-term faithful disciples.

These sins have not just been isolated events, but a culture that was created and allowed to continue in much of the LA church. We are committed to changing this culture to become more Christ-like. We are deeply sorry for every sin we committed and every sin we tolerated in all these areas. Some have asked "how could we have let these things happen?" The things we have outlined here in this letter were certainly major contributing factors.

Although there are many reasons why people leave the church, there are some who have left because of these sins and abuses. Many others have stayed and persevered in spite of them. We know that we cannot undo what has been done, but we want to be broken, repent and ask your forgiveness. Please do not interpret the brevity of these confessions to fully indicate the depth of our conviction. We realize that there was much that could be said about them all, and we desire to elaborate further in other individual conversations and lessons. As we are made aware of those who were hurt by these sins, efforts will be made to reach out to them and to ask for forgiveness. Any assistance in accomplishing this would be welcomed. This letter is only one step in the process of change. The advisory and deacons' groups of non-paid members is an additional step. In-depth Biblical teaching has already begun to occur in some regions on such subjects as respectful discipling, heartfelt giving and other topics. We are definitely available to those who will desire to discuss these matters further and welcome suggestions on how to correct our past mistakes and move forward.

There have been many conversations, many tears, many confrontations, many rebukes, and many confessions that have led us to the progress we have made so far. It has been easy for us to see some things and not so easy to see others. We are sorry that we have not more quickly seen these things and shared them with you. Your patience has been remarkable. For all of these sins, we beg your forgiveness. We are absolutely committed to change. We know in spite of this commitment, we will still make mistakes, we will stumble and we will fall. We need your help and support to make these changes deep and long lasting. We plead for your continued patience and prayers as we strive to make radical changes in these areas as well as stay open to the additional ones that we still need to make. This letter is intended to convey more specifically to the entire LA church the heartfelt sorrow we all feel and our commitment to change. Perhaps some of you have already started to see the effects of our repentance over the last fifteen months. However, we know there is still much more to do.

We do know that in spite of our many weaknesses and sins, the Lord's church is still amazing. God has been able to perform so many miracles over the last 13 years. He has blessed all of our lives with far more than we would have ever found in the world, but, where do we go from here? The Bible teaches that Christ's church needs the leadership of elders and evangelists (Ephesians 4:11). Although we have fallen short in so many ways, we desire and are committed to being the leaders that God has called us to be: men and women after His own heart — not perfect, but completely humble and gentle, committed to righteousness and the unity of this great church. We are committed to implementing all of the changes outlined above to enable us as a church to bring greater glory to God.

We deeply love the family of God here in Los Angeles and have so much gratitude and affection for all of you. We look forward to a stronger and closer partnership in the Gospel as we strive to become more like Jesus, make it to heaven and take as many as possible with us. Through repentance and forgiveness, may we all let the God of grace renew in each of our hearts the dream that began the day we were baptized into Christ.

(The letter is signed by the elders and their wives, and the evanbelists and women's ministry leaders)

Brotherhood News

Mark Hudson

Aiken, SC... The Aiken Church of Christ will host Steve Diggs in the "No Debt Not Sweat!" workshop on Saturday, August 16, 2003. Diggs is a '74 graduate of Lipscomb University. For nearly three decades he headed The Franklin Group. Currently, Diggs is a minister for the Antioch church of Christ in Antioch, Tennessee, works as a private investor, financial counselor, and speaker. To learn more about the seminar and books offered by Diggs, visit www.ndns.org. For information about the seminar in Aiken call 803-649-2700 or e-mail AikenCoC@AOL.com.

Yadkinville, NC... The Yadkinville Church of Christ will host the 17th annual Small Church Workshop May 15-16. This year's theme is: "The Ways We Grow," (this has been changed from the previously announced theme.) For more information call the church office at (336) 679-8924, or send e-mail to: yadkinvillecoc@aol.com.

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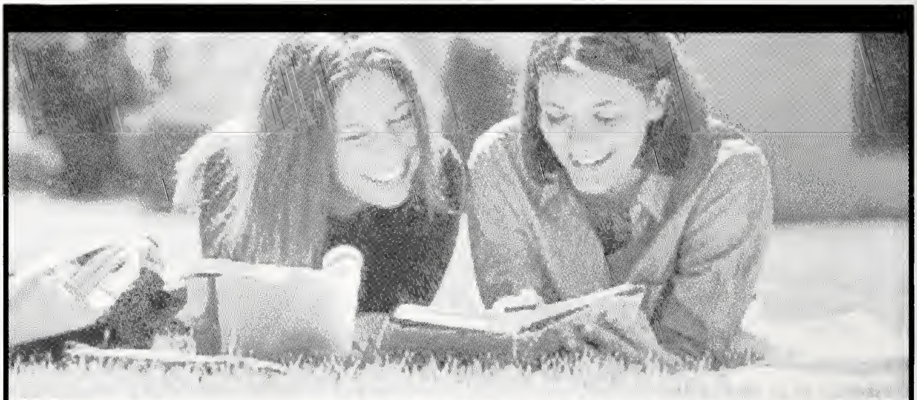

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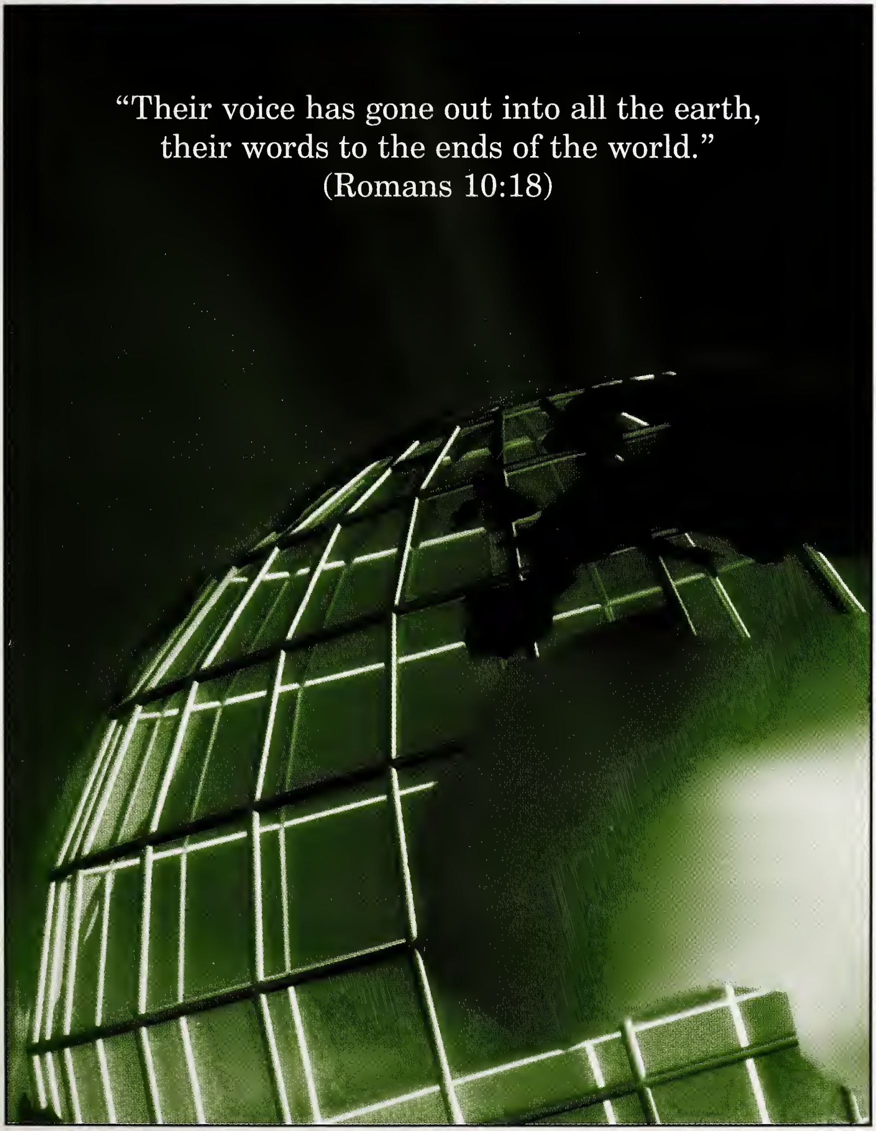

“Their voice has gone out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.”
(Romans 10:18)

CAROLINA christian

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Editorial & Publication Staff
Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
Peyton Crump, Design Editor

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Dennis Conner
PO Box 1369
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Address news items to:
Mark Hudson
2006 Whiskey Rd.
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Editorial

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The Gated Church

Dennis Conner

recently perusing one of the numerous Christian magazines that cross my desk each month, I came across an article that contained an interesting proposal. The article asked: wouldn't it be good to have Christian gated communities, complete with their own schools and even their own shopping districts?

As I read that, I thought to myself, “We already have gated Christian communities. We just call them churches.”

While, to me, the idea of gated communities for Christians is nothing less than a promotion of materialistic monasteries, the notion does serve as a fitting metaphor for the state of the modern church. While there are exceptions, most congregations of believers today are in a retreat and be comfortable mode. Not only have we circled the wagons, but we have also built walls behind which we may safely hide from the defilement and danger of the world. We worship in comfort and security, disturbing no one and being disturbed by no one. And that's the way we like it. We go about our business, maintaining the status quo, living in our own safe and comfortable little world. In many congregations we even have gate keepers to keep the riff raff out. After all, we must maintain our respectability!

"The scattered church, the going church, is that which is willing to leave its comfort zone."

In the Scriptures, however, Jesus never intended his church to be respectable. He did intend for it to be radical. He never intended it to be comfortable. He did intend for it to take risks. And Jesus never intended the church to hunker down behind protective walls. Instead, he intended for his church to throw the gates wide open and rush headlong through those gates into a lost world, a dying world.

David Watson has noted in his classic little book “Called and Committed”, “If Christ's first call to us is 'come,' his second is 'Go.'” The Master did say, “Therefore go and make disciples...” (Matthew 28:19). It never was Jesus' style to sit back and wait for the people to come to him. He was always on the offensive, moving among the people, engaging them wherever they were in life. Jesus was always "going," and if we are to be his church, so must we.

Stephen Neill has observed, "Most of our evangelism takes place within or on the fringes of the church; we do not seem yet to have found the way to break out...into the world." Why is this? Perhaps it's because the fringes are still well within the scope of our comfort zones. Some Christians and churches do make it out of their buildings, daring to test the fringes, but the fringes are as far as they get. A bold expedition into the world remains out of the question for such congregations.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus said, "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." In Jerusalem we witness the great in breaking of the kingdom of God and an explosion of the gospel. In time, God used a persecution to move the church out of Jerusalem, toward Samaria and the ends of the earth. Luke writes in 8:4 that those who had been scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Philip, for instance, went to a Samaritan city and proclaimed Christ there.

Samaria, home of the "unclean" half-breeds. Talk about leaving one's comfort zone! The scattered church, the going church, is that which is willing to leave its comfort zone. It is willing to go places it has not been before. At this point, I am not merely thinking about "going" geographically. Rather, I'm thinking about leaving our comfort zones behind and reaching out to those we might have previously ignored: the minorities in our communities (those of a different race), those of a different social class than our own, those of radically different lifestyles (you know, the "bad" sinners), those with seriously messed up lives who will need lots of spiritual nurturing and caring — all of those whom, by the voice of our active neglect, we have rendered unclean in our sight.

As we resolve to go forth, we must do so with confidence in the power of God. We cannot rely upon our own strength, ingenuity, or methods. In the book of Acts there is a dynamic power at work, impelling the church forward, instilling boldness in its messengers. That power is the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and there is nothing in Scripture to suggest (one's views

(continued on next page)

Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures

Ron Newberry

The story is hard to believe, but it's true. In the Canyonlands National Park in the state of Utah, thirteen park rangers lugged in equipment and lifted an 800-pound boulder. Under that boulder they found the severed arm of Aron Ralston.

Ralston, an avid mountain climber, had hiked about three or four miles to the remote canyon. As he traversed a canyon slope, the large rock apparently shifted and pinned Ralston's arm. Unable to free himself from the rock, Ralston lay waiting for help for five nights. Eventually he ran out of water and faced the real possibility of death. Confronted with imminent death, Ralston took drastic measures; he cut off his arm below the elbow with a pocketknife. What other choice did he have? Would you have taken such extreme measures to live? Take this radical step or die! He acted and lived.

(continued on next page)

(The Gated Church continued)

of the miraculous gifts notwithstanding) that God ever intended for that power to be diminished. While we are the instruments that God uses in dispersing the seed, the power is not in the instrument but in the one who wields it. The power is not in the container, but in the one who fills the container. So, as we "go," let us prepare to do the best we can, but do not forget that at the heart of our preparation is a dependence upon God to give the increase.

Further, as we resolve to go forth, let us pray specifically that God will create, or renew, in us a compassion for those who do not have him. Clearly, compassion was a hallmark of Jesus' ministry and must likewise characterize his disciples. Compassion is more than mere pity. It is a brokenheartedness over the plight of the lost that compels us to act. It is caring in action. Without compassion, our efforts to reach the lost are merely mercenary.

So, we have answered Christ's call to "come." Will we now answer his call to "go," leaving behind our gated churches?

(Desperate Times continued)

But the ordeal was not over. He had to secure a rope, repel sixty feet to the canyon floor and walk four miles to find help.

The 27 year old climber is in good spirits and doing well while recovering in a Grand Junction, Colorado hospital. He has had surgery necessary to prepare his arm for prosthesis. Yes, he does intend to return to climbing again.

The first thing that came to my mind when I heard this story on the news was Matthew 18: 8, “If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.”

"Maybe your boulders are more along the lines of gossip, resentment, judgmentalism, traditionalism, sowing discord, etc."

How many people do you know who get trapped under the weight of some sin so large that they cannot possibly move it? There is no help available. They have to take drastic measures or die. Some choose to cut themselves off from sinful relationships or sinful behavior no matter how painful that process may be. Some determine that their spiritual lives are worth the pain and agony that will follow the amputation of what has trapped them. They take out their pocket knife and...

On the other hand, there are those who hang on to their sin, trapped, hopeless and dying. But they had rather die than live without it. Like you I acknowledged the courage it took for Ralston to take such drastic measures. Amputating one's arm is not a pleasant prospect regardless of the circumstances. However, faced with losing his life, losing his arm was an acceptable loss. Faced with losing one's soul, you would think that those trapped in sin would cut off their offending arm because it is better to walk around alive with one arm than to die and be eternally lost with two.

Have you become trapped by something that will assure that you will spiritually die? Is it

(continued on next page)

The Gift and the Giver

Jerry Senn

One of my favorite writers is George MacDonald, an Englishman whose work greatly influenced C. S. Lewis in his struggles with faith. In "The Word of Jesus on Prayer", he says something profound to each of us about our giving and receiving:

"For the real good of every gift it is essential, first, that the giver be in the gift — as God

(continued on next page)

(Desperate Times continued)

worth the ultimate price of being separated from God in hell forever? For some the boulder that traps them may be drugs, alcohol, pornography, immorality of all kinds, stealing, etc. More than likely, since you are reading this article in the Carolina Christian, those issues are not the ones that trap you. Maybe your boulders are more along the lines of gossip, resentment, judgmentalism, traditionalism, sowing discord, etc. Make no mistake about it; those sins are just as dangerous and deadly as the other list of moral failures.

Desperate situations sometimes call for radical choices. Life or death? That's the real choice. May I loan you a knife? It's the sword of God called the Bible? Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." On Pentecost in Acts 2, the people who learned that they were trapped in sin were cut to the heart by the words that Peter spoke.

Maybe it's time for you to perform some surgery on yourself so you can live. Maybe there's something or someone that you need to sever your relationship with so you can be free. I know that it can be more than just uncomfortable; it can be painful and you may temporarily grieve the loss. But consider the real alternative. Consider that it's really a choice between life and death. Even if Jesus' illustration is just hyperbole, it is still better to go into eternity saved with one arm than to go into eternity lost with two healthy arms.

(The Gift continued)

always is, for He is love — and next, that the receiver know and receive the giver in the gift. Every gift of God is but a harbinger of His greatest and only sufficing gift — that of Himself. No gift unrecognized as coming from God is at its own best; therefore, many things that God would gladly give us must wait until we ask for them, that we may know whence they come. When in all gifts we find Him, then in Him we shall find all things."

> "We are not really giving to God until it is our greatest joy to share his gifts with others."

Seeing the hand of a loving God in every good gift is essential to possessing a practical, workable faith. As James put it, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows," (James 1:17). In developing a strong faith, I must understand one central thing about God: he is the source of everything good and he is not the source of anything evil (1 John 1:5).

However, James is saying more than that God is good. Earlier in the letter he said, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him," (James 1:5). So, in everything I receive, I should see not merely the gift, but the giver. And even in those experiences which seem utterly evil, God will bring a positive benefit for the sake of my soul (Romans 8:28).

God is present in his gift of this expanding universe. He is in his gift of life and breath, and in my soul. The Father is in his gift of Christ, whose painful death and separation paid in full my sin debt and yours. When I look into the face of each of my children and grandchildren, and when I experience the wonderful expressions of love lavished upon me by my wife and my spiritual family, I am beholding God, the giver.

Ralph W. Seager has written in "The Extravagance of God", "More sky than man can see, More seas than he can sail, More sun that he can bear to watch, More stars than he can scale. More breath than he can breathe,

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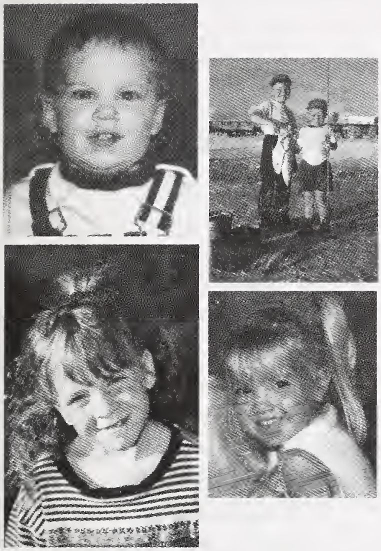

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Urgent Need!

Rejecting the Theory of Relativity

Russ McCullough

It's 4:15 a.m. on Friday morning and I have been unable to sleep since 2:30 a.m., I suspect not an uncommon occurrence among the general population. People fail to sleep for many reasons. My reason happens to be that I woke up worrying about the burdens I carry at my place of employment. Like many of you, I find myself in a workplace environment devoid of Christian principles. My mind raced with thoughts of my burdens and what action should I take or not take.

Soon my thoughts turned to prayer to share my burdens with the Lord. Then my prayer suddenly ended when I began thinking that the Lord would find my burdens insignificant with the burdens of many of you. How could God care about my burdens at work when the future of this congregation is so much more important in comparison? How could God care about my burdens at work when so many people have no job at all? How could God care about my burdens at work when I yet by His grace remain in good health when so many do not? How could God care about my burdens at work when people are starving in the world? How could God care about my burdens at work when…the list is endless? I soon came to feel guilty for bringing my burdens — trivial in comparison to the burdens of others — to the Lord's attention. Guilt, wretchedness and hopelessness were threatening to overtake me. Then just when despair over my dilemma was about to shut me down, the thought occurred that God MUST speak to this subject in His Word. He does indeed! What I discovered I feel compelled to share with you.

Some things we understand intellectually and yet do not understand emotionally. For example, we understand intellectually that all sin separates us from God and there is no such thing as a "small" or "large" sin in the eyes of the Lord.

Emotionally, however, we often wrestle with the guilt of past sins — consequences of which continue to haunt us — even though we know those sins are forgiven. However, God does not grade on a scale of relativity. There is no such thing as being "somewhat saved" or "mostly saved." We are either saved or lost, period. Jesus said, "You are either for me or against me." We don't slide in and slide out of salvation several times a day based upon some "sliding scale" that God continually uses on us. "If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His son, purifies us from all sin." (I John 1:7)

In like manner, neither does God employ some "sliding scale of relativity" to determine whether or not our burdens are "worthy" of His care! After reading what God has to say on the subject, I discovered that He does not look at my burdens in relation to the burdens of other people in order to decide if He will care or not about my burdens. Think about it! If God were to do so, He would ultimately only care about the ONE person on earth that happens to be suffering the MOST at that given point in time! All others, by default, would have to carry their own burdens themselves until such time as they "moved up the line." The conclusion to the matter is this: God does not care why we are hurting, the hurt alone, regardless of it's cause, is sufficient to warrant His total care and attention! Hear what the Lord has to say based upon a compilation of the following scriptures: Psalms 145:14, 17-20, I Peter 5:7 and Matthew 11:28-30.

"The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. The Lord is righteous in all His ways and loving toward all He has made. The Lord is near to all who call on Him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear Him; He hears their cry and saves them. The Lord watches over all who love Him...Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you... Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Let us once and for all, reject the theory of relativity and share our burdens with each other while we collectively give them to the Lord to carry!

Russ McCullough serves the Archdale church in Charlotte, NC, as an elder.

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Still Trying to Play Ball

Stephen J. Walls-Mathis

I joined my church's basketball team this year with great expectations.

Here was my chance to do well at something fun and invigorating. I had the chance to demonstrate my skills on the court to my team of peers. While I knew the performance would be nothing close to Jordanesque, I was hoping to do well: Play a strong defense, set some good picks, make a few (hopefully game winning) shots.

It didn't happen.

There are a couple of reasons for this. First, while I am physically healthy and in relatively good shape, I am not exactly an athletic person. I lack the basic kinesthetic sense that leads to smooth motion on the court. Second, while I have played a lot of playground basketball, I know very little about the actual mechanics of the game. (In fact, during a time out in our first game, when one of the key players told our team "You've got to box out, guys!" I had to say, "Okay, so let's pretend I have no idea what you mean when you say 'box out.'")

"Responsibility is not popular, but it is essential."

My season ended with two injuries. Late one night, walking through our house with all the lights off, I kicked some invisible object in the hall and broke my little toe. One week after that I knocked down one of our opponents when he was trying to make a shot. (I took his elbow into my ribs. He bounced up off the floor to make two free throws.) After some strenuous lifting at work a few days later, I had to go see the doctor and was diagnosed with a bruised rib. A season ending injury for me.

Needless to say, I am bummed by my performance on the basketball team. I never did score a point for our team, or play better than the mediocre level. To be honest, it still bothers me. I was discouraged for a couple of weeks when I finally asked myself why was it so important to do well at basketball?

I think it has something to do with demonstrating my masculinity. I feel a strong desire to prove myself physically, to be able to compete with my peers and beat them. And while I know rationally it has nothing to do with my worth as an individual it still bothers me that I was shown up on the court by some female players.

In his latest book, "Bringing Up Boys", James Dobson contends that masculinity is under attack in our society, and has been for some time. He makes a strong case in his writing, and the consequences are challenging. Certain elements in our culture would have us believe that men are basically immature, overbearing, and hopelessly in need of becoming more "feminine." While much of this is presented with a "wink and a nudge," the implications are seen in some of our public schools, the media, and government programs. Our desire for equality has led to instability and confusion. I have had to rethink some of my own assumptions about the way things work and the way God designed men and women.

My son, Bryan, just turned three. Watching him interact with the world made me ask, "So what does it mean to be a man?" The first definition that came to my mind was responsibility. God, in his infinite wisdom, designed man to take responsibility for his actions, to care for his wife and family, and to accomplish the work he is given.

If masculinity has taken a beating in our culture, personal responsibility has fared even worse. What else would explain the rampant lawsuits blaming companies like McDonalds for the choices we make? (Yes, I'd like fries with that equal to the amount of four potatoes fried in deep grease.)

We have been trained to place blame but have little practice taking responsibility for ourselves. For example, how many of us reap the benefits of living in a free society but have no interest in participating in our republic? Yet our failure to vote doesn't keep us from complaining about the decisions of government. Responsibility is not popular. But it is essential.

Unfortunately, its lack is nothing new. It goes back to the garden, to the first man who happened to forget just what it means to be a man. There's a phrase in that infamous apple scene I had always missed until it reached out and grabbed me just a few years ago. When Eve gave in to the serpent's lies and ate the forbidden fruit, Adam was there with her.

Look at that verse again, Genesis 3:6. "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it."

Adam was there. He was with Eve when she took the fruit. But he was silent (Larry Crabb, et al, "The Silence of Adam"). We have been living with the consequences of that silence ever since. God is calling us today to once again take up the charge to be responsible, to respond to life in the way of Jesus, to live faithful and holy lives.

So what does responsibility look like? What does it mean to be masculine, or feminine for that matter, in a godly way? It's okay to recognize, value and nurture the differences between men and women. (That's part of God's creation, and he thinks it's good.) But, we cannot excuse obtuse behavior by saying "boys will be boys." We were not created for crude behavior or selfish indulgence. God calls us to recognize our responsibilities and honor them, whether married or single, parent or childless, male or female.

Jesus Christ has to be our model for day to day living. That means I will refuse to accept our culture's message. I will avoid excess and be a good steward of the gifts God has given me. I will avoid making excuses, seeking to be sincere and responsible. Regardless of whether we are male or female, we were created in God's image. Our lives should reflect that.

I may not ever do well on the basketball court. In fact, I think I'm going to sell my jersey to someone else next season. (For sale. Two color reversible basketball jersey in excellent condition. Rarely touched by sweat.) Hard as it seems, I can give up my hoop dreams without giving up my masculinity. Because, by the grace of God and the strength of his Spirit, I will not give up my responsibility as a husband, as a father, as a citizen of this world and the one to come. I will strive to be faithful. I will teach my children discipline and help them make good choices. I will take responsibility for my choices and actions. Imagine what would happen if men were to first and foremost take responsibility for their choices and actions, and raised their sons to do the same.

It just might change the world.

Stephen J. Walls-Mathis can be contacted at mathissj@juno.com.

How Does Our Relationship With God Transform Us? (Part 2)

David French

To know God is to become like God. For, as we come to know God more intimately and more thoroughly, His nature begins to transform who we are and how we live our lives. So exactly what, then, do we learn about God (as we come to know Him more intimately) that reshapes who we are and how we behave? In a previous article we examined numerous passages in the Bible that reveal the nature of God and identify what most motivates God to intervene in human history. At the top of this list is a realization that God is a God of love who cares deeply about the injustice and violence among men.

In fact, one of the most significant contributions of the Prophets is what they tell us about God. They reveal to us a God who cares passionately about the human condition and who gets angry at the sight of injustice and oppression. They, in particular, instruct us as to the evils of indifference, for our God is not indifferent to evil. The God of the Hebrews was completely different from the pagan gods who cared nothing about human pain and suffering. In contrast, the God of the Bible is a God who cannot and does not stand by quietly and detached as the poor are oppressed and the weak are abused. God is not indifferent to the human condition for He is (by nature) a God of love and justice. This is why God has intervened in human history: to save the oppressed and overthrow the unjust.

"What, then, does it mean to be a disciple of Christ?"

I believe this also explains God's wrath and His destruction of whole cities and civilizations (e.g. the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of Canaan in the conquest, etc). God's wrath is an expression of God's love, for the opposite of love is not hate but apathy and indifference. God would not be a God of love if He did not act against perpetual cycles of injustice and oppression. His love for humanity demanded the removal of those cities and cultures that were perpetual sponsors of injustice and immorality. God knew humanity needed the purging of these cities and cultures. Thus, God's wrath must be understood as His instrument of love that removes the cancer from the human race.

God's desire to redeem and rescue humanity from these perpetual cycles of violence and oppression is what explains His ultimate intervention in human history: Jesus Christ. As already noted, essential to Israel's calling was that they walk in the way of justice and righteousness (Genesis 18:17-19). Obviously, the prophets demonstrate how miserably Israel failed to fulfill this calling. It is also clear that the leaders of Israel failed in their primary responsibility to administer and maintain justice in the land (Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 2 Samuel 8:15; Ezekiel 45:9-10; Micah 3:1-4; and Ezekiel 34). In fact, Israel's leaders became the primary instruments of oppression and injustice (Ezekiel 34).

Thus, it is in this context (the failure of the leaders to administer justice) that God began to announce the sending of His Messiah — a new leader who would establish and administer justice. Isaiah prophesies that a “shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse” and “with righteousness He will judge the poor and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth” (11:1-10). Isaiah also prophesied, “For a child will be born to us...and the government will rest on His shoulders...” and he will sit on the throne of David “to establish it and uphold it with justice and righteousness” (9:1-7). And, again, Isaiah prophesied, “Behold, My Servant...I have put my Spirit upon Him and He will bring forth justice... He will faithfully bring forth justice...and establish justice in the earth” (42:1-4). In the midst of oppression, Jeremiah prophesied of the Messiah, “In those days I will cause a righteous branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth” (33:15). Hosea spoke of a new day when God would make a new covenant with Israel and would betroth Israel in “righteousness and justice” (2:18-20). Isaiah also spoke of this new day when God would rebuild Jerusalem, but would do so this time with justice and righteousness and with the Messiah as the costly cornerstone (28:16). Based on these (and many other similar Messianic prophesies), we must conclude that the mission of Christ (in coming to earth) was primarily concerned with the overthrow of injustice and oppression (which includes sin) and with the establishment of a new age characterized by justice and righteousness (the characteristics of God's own nature).

Is this not exactly what Jesus

himself affirmed as his mission on earth? Reading from Isaiah, Jesus defined his mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).” When John's disciples asked him whether or not he was the expected Messiah, Jesus told them to report to John what they saw and heard: “The blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matthew 11:5).

Jesus' concern for the poor is well recognized in Luke's gospel, but less known is the same affirmation in the gospel of Matthew about the mission of Christ to earth. Matthew introduces Jesus in his gospel as the Messiah who has come to fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:13-17, 5:17-20). Matthew intends to show that now in Jesus is the righteousness of God made known (a righteousness not realized in the life of Israel). This righteousness of God (Matthew proclaims) is about being a cross-bearing servant and it involves the ethics of love and justice. It is also evident that Matthew wants his readers to see that Jesus is the obedient Son that God always wanted Israel to be but never was (Matthew 2:18, 3:17, 17:5). Thus, if one wants to know what God wants His people to be, look at Jesus and imitate His life. And, if one wants to know what is the righteousness of God, look and listen to Jesus. He is the primary example of God's righteousness. Imitate His life.

As Jesus begins his ministry in Matthew, he withdraws to Galilee to live in Capernaum. Matthew sees this as the fulfillment of Isaiah 9, which is a Messianic prophesy that clearly defines what would be the mission of Christ to earth: “For a child will be born to us...and the government will rest on His shoulders...to establish it and uphold it with justice and righteousness” (Isaiah 9:1-7). Jesus then begins his ministry. He begins to proclaim that the Kingdom is here (Matthew 4:17) and he begins teaching and doing the righteousness of God (Matthew 4:23-25). Matthew goes to great lengths in his gospel to emphasize that Jesus, unlike the Pharisees, practiced what he preached. Throughout Matthew episodes of Jesus teaching are followed by periods of Jesus doing what He had taught. In fact, Matthew is structured around five major sections, which include this pattern (teaching material followed by actual ministry). That Matthew is divided into five sections is itself significant for it suggests that Jesus (like Moses who gave us the five books of the Law) is God's lawgiver. It is Jesus who has been sent to reveal what truly is the righteousness of God.

The first section begins with the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus tries to explain the true intent of the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17-20). Throughout chapter five Jesus reinterprets several of the Ten Commandments in an effort to explain the true intent of God's Law; specifically, those laws that have to do with our relationship to others (the horizontal dimension of the Law). In what is straight out of the prophets, Jesus warns his audience that before worshipping God, one must correct any injustices against others (5:23-24). This recalls what the Prophets had said when they warned God's people that their worship to God was useless as long as injustice and oppression continued in the land (Isaiah 1:10-17; Amos 5:22-24). Thus, just as the Prophets before, Jesus intertwines the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Law. One cannot worship God if one acts unjustly and without love toward others. Such religion is a false religion, for the true worship of God transforms our behavior towards others. If it does not, then it is vain worship and offensive to God. And, lest we miss the point, Jesus concludes his sermon with the following summary statement: “In everything, do to others what you would have them to do you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

Characteristic of Matthew, Jesus (having concluded a time of teaching about the righteousness of God) now goes forth to do the righteousness of God (ministry). He heals Peter's mother-in-law, casts out demons and heals all who were sick (8:14-17). Matthew then explains that this was in fulfillment of Isaiah 53. Given the type and number of quotations from Isaiah, it is clear that Matthew intends to present Jesus as the suffering servant of God from Isaiah who goes about delivering men from sin and oppression. The key word here is the word servant. The righteousness of God is about being a servant to humanity. It is about salvaging and redeeming broken lives for useful service in the kingdom of God. It is about renouncing the self-interest of the carnal man and bearing the sacrificial cross of Christ, which transforms us into self-giving servants of humanity.

Jesus continues as God's servant by delivering two men who were under the oppression of evil (8:28-34). He then heals a paralytic, forgiving him of his sins and delivering him from the consequences of spiritual oppression/sin (9:1-8). Finally, Jesus begins calling sinners out of spiritual oppression (sin) to become useful servants in God's kingdom (9:12-16). He calls a tax collector named Matthew to discipleship and even fellowships with sinners to redeem them. The Pharisees condemn Jesus for eating with such sinners, but Jesus explains that redeeming the lost is at the heart of doing God's righteousness. But, they do not understand. In frustration, Jesus, quoting from Hosea, rebukes them for they do not understand that what God desires most is mercy, not sacrifice — acts of love, not rites of religion (9:16). This quote from Hosea was given as a judgment against Israel for their acts of injustice. Hosea rebuked them for being zealous for the worship of God while mistreating and abusing their fellowman (6:4-6).

Jesus again quotes from the same passage in Hosea when the Pharisees condemned His disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath (12:1-12). Once more, Jesus explains that they would not have condemned the innocent if they understood that human need often out-trumps the letter of the law. The Pharisees made the same mistake that religious people have often made: thinking that religion is a matter of worship and beliefs. But Jesus makes it clear (as did the Law and the prophets) that the true worship of God has more to do with how we treat others (love, justice and mercy). True faith includes proper worship and beliefs, but it goes far beyond this to these weightier matters of the Law.

Matthew then tells us that Jesus, seeing the huge crowds following him, had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. We cannot ignore Matthew's obvious allusion to Ezekiel 34. Ezekiel condemned the shepherds (leaders) of Israel for having oppressed the people of God rather than upholding justice in the land. Instead, God's people had been scattered without a just

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Fathers Provoke Not Your Children

Russ Jurek

"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4).

The father was in his son's room where he found a box containing drug paraphernalia. About that time, the son walks into the room and the father confronts him with his find. Shouting to the son, the father demands, "Where did you learn this"? "Who got you into this"? As the anger and frustration mounts within the teen, he shouts back at his father, "From you dad, I learned it from you!" You may remember the scene from this anti-drug commercial, which aired a few years back. I haven't seen it in a while, but the message is still true and clear.

Our children learn some of life's most important lessons from their parents. Children watch everything we do and contrary to what we might think sometimes, they hear everything we say. They seem to hone in on and remember most, the things we say that don't match what we do.

They also take our seemingly harmless examples and magnify them. For instance, some Christian parents involve themselves in the social drinking of alcohol. They reason, since the Bible doesn't prohibit drinking, only drunkenness, it's ok to have a drink every now and then. The reasoning seems sound until their teenager becomes involved in "social drinking" with his or her peers.

Then they attempt to tell him, it's ok for adults but not for kids. That may make sense to an

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(Our Relationship continued)

leader to care for them. Thus, God rejected the shepherds of Israel and proclaimed that he himself would become their shepherd: "I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them."

Jesus, having compassion on the lost sheep of God, turns to his disciples and tells them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few" (Matthew 9:37). Given the context, what Jesus is telling his disciples is that there

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(The Gift continued)
More yield than he can sow, More grace than he can comprehend, More love than he can know."

And, as A. W. Tozer has written, "An infinite God can give all of Himself to each of His children. He does not distribute Himself that each may have a part, but to each one He gives all of Himself as fully as if there were no others."

Seeing the giver behind each gift will help us imitate our brethren in Macedonia. "Their overflowing joy...welled up in rich generosity. They gave...even beyond their ability...They pleaded...for the privilege...They gave themselves first to the Lord," (2 Corinthians 8:2-5). This may be the reason C. S. Lewis could write, "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare." After all, God isn't so impressed with our gifts as he is with givers. We are not really giving to God until it is our greatest joy to share his gifts with others.

Jerry Senn serves as preacher and elder to the Hendersonville church in Hendersonville, NC. He can be contacted at hcoc@brinet.com.

(Fathers continued)
adult but to a teen it only seems hypocritical. Smoking, cursing, viewing porn, lying, gossiping, cheating are all things parents (yes some Christian parents) do without considering the effect it has on their children. When the child copies them, they don't seem to know where it comes from.

Since our children are going to copy what they see and hear us say and do, we should be saying and doing only those things that will point them towards God and His word. We must bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord not only by taking them to "church" but also by living Jesus in our own lives every day. Otherwise they will get exasperated and figure, "What's the point of following the Lord since my parents aren't. Why should I"? Fathers, take the lead in your family by setting good examples in everything you do. You will keep from frustrating your children and they will be more open to the teachings of Jesus.

Just Now

Mark Hudson

If the Lord wills, I plan to return to Guyana this summer for my fourth mission trip. Last year I bought a t-shirt that best describes my feelings: “My body is here, but my mind is in Guyana.” I miss my South American Christian brothers and sisters, and I look forward to strengthening those who have been baptized in recent years.

The pace of life is different in Guyana. The lifestyle and language of the people taught me an important lesson. During my first trip to the “bush” I struggled against a different world. The village of Orealla, 52 miles up the Corentyne River, had no electricity, no automobiles, and no telephones. Small boats provided the village with its only contact to the rest of the world. Navigation on the river was dictated by the tide (seven feet even at Orealla). Passengers on grounded boats waited patiently for the rising tide. Departure was also timed to coincide with the right tide at the destination. Around the village, the only motorized vehicles were a couple of logging tractors. People walked. Passing rain showers sometimes affected schedules. During light rains, people walked and got wet. During heavy rains, people waited patiently under a tree or a friend's porch.

Speech patterns in Guyana were also different from the US. Guyana is a former British Colony. English is spoken with a definite British and South Caribbean flare. One of the most unusual and endearing expressions was “just now.” I would ask, “When does the boat leave?” Someone would answer, “Just now.” When will the store open? “Just now.” When will it stop raining? “Just now.” When do we eat? “Just now.” I soon discovered “just now” expressed more about attitude than chronology. “Just now” could mean immediately or in another five hours, but it usually demonstrated a willingness to wait patiently.

I pray that we will not get swept away by the frantic pace of life. Enjoy each hour as a precious gift from God. See interruptions and delays as opportunities to pause, reflect, and thank God for all His blessings…just now.

Mark Hudson can be contacted at mrhudfam@aol.com.

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With All Your Heart

Peter Rode

People are usually drawn to others who give their whole heart to whatever they are doing: singers who sing with passion, actors who become the part they are playing, athletes who leave it all on the field or court. The same may be said for teachers who have a passion for sharing knowledge, or preachers who passionately share God with their listeners, and churches that serve the people of their community with joy and enthusiasm because of their love for God.

On the other hand, most people are completely turned off by those who do things halfheartedly. Houses that get half-built are not very impressive. Neither are movies that are done poorly, games that are played without a desire for excellence, nor music that is devoid of life.

I am not talking about more than enthusiasm. Anyone can act enthusiastically. I am talking about total commitment. It is more enjoyable to be a part of things that are done wholeheartedly and be with people who want to give themselves completely to a task. I am not saying that I always do things wholeheartedly, but I do want to grow to the point that nothing I do is done halfheartedly.

The question is, how do I get there? What do I need to learn, or relearn, that will help me to live my life with my whole heart? Here are two passages of Scripture that remind me of wholeheartedness:

"One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?' 'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these," (Mark 12:28-31).

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism," (Colossians 3:23-25).

Let's not make the same mistake that the church in Laodicea made when they thought that

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A Thing of Beauty

Kent Massey

I love butterflies. I suppose it goes back to the second grade and my first science experiment. It was watching a creepy, crawly caterpillar spin a cocoon and envelope himself within a chrysalis. The waiting and watching of the next few days was rewarded with wonder at the transformation of that plain, ugly caterpillar into a beautiful and soaring butterfly. Watching the

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(With All Your Heart continued)

halfhearted devotion would be enough to please the Lord. This is what Christ thought about their attitude: “These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spew you out of my mouth,” (Revelation 3:15-16).

A Haitian preacher once illustrated the need for wholehearted devotion to Christ this way: A certain man wanted to sell his house for $2,000. Another man wanted very badly to buy it, but because he was poor, could not afford the full price. After much bargaining, the owner agreed to sell the house for half the original price with just one stipulation — he would retain ownership of one small nail protruding from just over the door. After several years the original owner wanted the house back, but the new owner was unwilling to sell. So the first owner went out, found the carcass of a dead dog, and hung it from the single nail he still owned. Soon, the house became unlivable and the family was forced to sell the house to the owner of the nail. The preacher's conclusion: “If we leave the Devil with even one small peg in our life, he will return to hang his rotting garbage on it, making it unfit for Christ's habitation.”

Keep the faith!

Peter Rode serves the Friendly Ave. Church of Christ in Greensboro. He can be contacted at 5101 W. Friendly Ave., Greensboro, NC 27410.

(A Thing of Beauty continued)
butterfly emerge from its lifeless shell was a miracle.

What happened in that unseen world of the cocoon? How did the wonderful and magical metamorphosis take place? It may seem wonderful to the watcher, but for the caterpillar it is anything but wonderful.

A caterpillar doesn't just grow into a butterfly. It must molt and endure as its entire structure is rearranged. A cocoon is where the caterpillar risks it all as it enters into a total rebuilding process. A cocoon is the place where the caterpillar allows itself to disintegrate into a blob of gelatinous goo without structure or identity so that it can come out with sharpened senses and breathtaking beauty. A cocoon is the place where the caterpillar dies to one way of life and is born into a new way of living. It is only in taking the risk of entering the inert pupa that the caterpillar can go from dormancy to potency, from ground hugging to sky touching, from ugliness to beauty.

"The way to transformation is found in risk."

It seems ironic that in today's vernacular, the word “cocoon” has come to mean the opposite of what it means to the caterpillar. It isn't a place of safety. Cocoons are self-contained packets of risk. The way to transformation is found in risk.

Maybe that is what Jesus was trying to get his audience to understand in Matthew 10:39, “ If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give it up for me, you will find it.” Jesus calls us to risk. The idea of a risk-free life is unrealistic. Nothing is safe. “Safety first” was not Jesus' motto and is often fatal to holiness.

As Christians, the contrast isn't between risk and safety, but between risk and danger. From the earliest days of Jesus' ministry, true disciples left the security of home and tradition and risked it all on Jesus (Mark 7:5).

It's amazing all the risks you have taken today:

· A 1 in 2,000,000 chance of dying by falling out of bed

· A 1 in 350,000 chance of being electrocuted by your alarm clock

· While brushing your teeth, you flirted with the 20% chance that your local water supply has infectious bacteria floating in it

· Men endured a 1 in 7,000 chance of a serious injury while shaving

· If you took the elevator instead of the stairs, you took a 1 in 6,000,000 risk of an elevator accident.

· On your way home from your errands, there was a 1 in 11,000 risk of dying in your car as either a passenger or driver

· A risk of 1 in 145 of your car being stolen from your driveway as you read this.

Life is risky business. Being a Christian compels us to acts that are by their very nature risky and dangerous. We are called to go into all the world and confront evil, to speak the truth, to lift up Jesus, to love the unlovable, to seek the ways of justice and peace, and to be initiators of love and reconciliation in a hurting world.

None of this is easy, but God will never call us to risk and then leave us. It may seem safer to stay in the cocoons of our homes and congregations, but that is not where the action is. It would be easier to opt for safety and security, but that isn't what we are called to do. God will give us courage and strength to take those risks for him.

Several years ago, James Agee wrote a stirring novel titled "A Death in the Family." The story is told through the eyes and perspective of a little boy whose father was killed in an automobile accident. Agee tells of the bewilderment of the boy and his struggle to make some sense of the awful ending. The story is richly textured as he recounts the smell of the funeral home flowers, the solemn calling of friends, the warm hugs of his grandmothers, and the tender touch of uncles. The story ends with the boy attending his father's funeral. As the service ends and the last prayer is spoken, the little boy witnesses what he believes to be a miracle. Standing alone by his father's casket, a beautiful multicolored butterfly slowly glides into the open grave and lights softly upon the casket. The wings beat once and then twice. There is a perfect harmony with the silence of the moment. And then, as gently as it entered the grace, it flies off into the sky. He smiles and realizes that what he thought was an ending became a beginning.

I read once that in the Nazi concentration camps where children were kept before they were taken to the gas chambers, the walls hold the artistic scratching

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Communion

David Kneip

What would you say if I asked you this question: “What does the first day of school mean?” You might be uncertain about how to answer. What words or phrases pop to your mind when I say “First day of school”? Maybe “newness,” “friends,” “teachers,” “harder classes,” “no more summer vacation,” “getting a fresh start.” Those are all legitimate possibilities.

So why isn't there just one meaning to “First day of school”? I mean, two plus two equals four, right? And there's only one president of the United States right now. So why doesn't “first day of school” mean only one thing, too? You might be frowning at me; this is a lame question, David. Of course it doesn't mean just one thing; it's too complex. There are too many people involved, and they all bring different things to the table. Further, “first day of school” has meant different things to me in different years, and those accumulate, so that I have lots of thoughts and feelings when a new school year rolls around.

If you're thinking those things, I believe that you're right. There are some things in life that are just too complex to be captured in one idea or word or phrase. I think that one of those things is what we call the “Communion,” or the “Lord's Supper.” What would you say if you brought a friend to church, and they asked you what this “Lord's Supper” thing means? How would you respond?

It's pretty complex, isn't it? And if you have trouble answering, you aren't alone. The New Testament doesn't just have one idea about what the Lord's Supper means. Let's look at some of the big parts, shall we?

First, that we call it the “Communion” is significant. The gospels record Jesus as saying that the bread is his body, and that the wine is his blood (e.g., Matt. 26:26-28). When we eat the bread and drink the cup, we are taking part of Jesus into our bodies, in a spiritual way. Paul reinforces this in 1 Corinthians 10:16: “Is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?” Paul would also remind us that we aren't just communing with the Lord but also with one another. We can't just shut our eyes and have a private moment with God; rather, the Communion is a time that we celebrate our oneness in Christ, who died for all of us, in fact, for

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Tale of Two Cities

Mark Hudson

The first-century congregations in Jerusalem and Antioch were united in doctrine, but they had completely different personalities. They functioned differently even though

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(Communion continued)

everyone in the world, and who welcomes all of us, sinner and saint alike, to his table to eat and drink. That's partly why Paul gets so upset in 1 Corinthians 11 when the church members aren't waiting for the others to arrive before they start the potluck of which the Lord's Supper was a part? They're missing a key part of the whole deal.

We also call it the “Lord's Supper,” don't we? That's appropriate because we say that Jesus established it as something we should do in remembrance of him (Luke 22:19). The church has ever since taken Jesus' words as instructions for a part of our worship. This is a big point. Communion isn't just something the church thought was a good idea; rather, it goes back to the Lord himself. We do it because Jesus told us to, and we also do it to remember him in a particular way. That's why so many of the songs we sing at that time have to do with his crucifixion.

There are many other elements to the Lord's Supper — the connections with the Old Testament and the looking ahead to the heavenly feast not least among them. I want to highlight one more, though, and that's the element of thanksgiving. The early church referred to this part of worship as “The Thanksgiving,” and that makes good sense. God has blessed us with many things, in church with the word (the Bible) and the Word (Jesus), and so we give thanks to him. We give thanks for simple reminders of Jesus in bread and wine, and we give thanks by giving back part of what we have in our lives.

I encourage you to read your Bibles with these ideas in mind. You'll find new connections you never knew were there. And, next time you're in church, don't just shut your eyes at the Lord's Supper. Be aware of your brothers and sisters, focus your thoughts on Jesus, and give thanks for all he has done for you.

(Tale of Two Cities continued)

they shared the same apostolic teaching. Jerusalem was reactionary. Antioch was very goal-oriented. There was room in the Kingdom for both styles. Jerusalem and Antioch each demonstrated strengths and weakness.

The Jerusalem congregation is portrayed in the first few chapters of Acts as waiting and responding. The role and work of that church was driven by events. Jerusalem's reactionary nature came quite honestly. The apostles had been commanded to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). In their waiting, they devoted themselves to prayer. Devotion to prayer became a trademark of Christians in Jerusalem. Many early sermons by the apostles were not planned as scheduled events. Rather, the apostles preached the gospel in response to the opportunities presented. The benevolence and sharing among believers did not start as an organized program. It was a spontaneous outpouring necessitated by the number of people from across the globe that stayed in Jerusalem after their conversion on Pentecost. In Acts 6, unfortunately, a complaint arose that the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked. As the number of disciples increased, so did the need to provide some structure and organization. Although the apostles still responded to a pressing need, they reacted according to principle: “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables” (Acts 6:2). They devised a plan and implemented a solution.

Acts chapter 8 reports that a persecution arose against the church. That's an interesting choice of words since some of the apostles had already been jailed repeatedly, beaten, and threatened to speak no more in the name of Jesus. In the earlier persecutions, the apostles always bounced back with determination to obey God rather than men (Acts 4:19, 20; 5:29). They even rejoiced that they had been worthy to suffer shame for Christ (Acts 5:41). The Jerusalem church aggressively taught in Jerusalem, and the church grew. However, the congregation did not actively fulfill Christ's command for them to be witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and all the earth (Acts 1:8). The persecution that erupted in the wake of Stephen's death scattered the church. Those leaving Jerusalem preached the word (Acts 8:1b, 4).

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(Tale of Two Cities continued)

Sadly, the great commission was fulfilled in response to persecution rather than by deliberate planning.

We meet the Antioch church in Acts 11. By contrast, the Antioch congregation was very deliberate in its planning and work. Today, we would describe them as “goal-oriented”, “proactive”, or “purpose-driven”. Refugees from Jerusalem planted the Antioch church. In response to this newly established congregation, Jerusalem dispatched Barnabas to Antioch. The message preached by Barnabas was boiled down into one potent statement: “remain true to the Lord” (Acts 11:23). Barnabas quickly took temporary leave of Antioch. He traveled to Tarsus, found Paul, and returned to Antioch. One can only wonder how different church history would be had Barnabas not had the forethought to recruit Paul for the Antioch work.

Agabus the prophet came to Antioch and told of an upcoming famine. The congregation collected money and sent relief before the need became a crisis. In Acts 13, the Holy Spirit commanded the Antioch church to send out Barnabas and Paul as missionaries. Rather than simply preaching to opportunities, the church now planned a preaching tour. The second missionary journey of Paul was also purposed driven. “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (Acts 15:36). Not only was the itinerary goal-oriented, the content of the preaching would be more for edification than evangelism.

At this point, the purpose-driven mission hit a snag. Barnabas and Paul disagreed over John Mark. Mark “deserted” Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Barnabas wanted to give Mark a second chance. Paul insisted otherwise. So sharp was their disagreement that Paul and Barnabas separated. This disagreement has often been portrayed as a “personality conflict.” Could it be that Paul and Barnabas had different goals for the second journey? Paul wanted to strengthen churches previously established. Barnabas wanted also to strengthen Mark and restore him to ministry. Goals can be beneficial, but inflexible goals can be divisive. In Acts 16:6-10, we see Paul learning another important lesson. Paul had his agenda and itinerary, but God vetoed those plans. The

(continued on page 33)

(Our Relationship continued) are far more broken and oppressed people in this world than there are servants of God ready and willing to minister unto them. There are so many whose lives need to be salvaged and redeemed for useful service in the kingdom of God, but there are not enough cross-bearing servants of God to do this work. It is at this point that Jesus then commissions his disciples to do what he has been doing: delivering the oppressed (casting out demons) and healing the sick (10:1-2). In other words, there are not enough servants of God in the world and Jesus can't do it all himself (nor continue doing it indefinitely); thus, he now recruits the disciples into this work of God.

What, then, does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? Can it mean anything else but that we are called into the service of God to redeem the broken and oppressed of the world? Does it not mean that we are part of a new kingdom that is founded on the principles of love and justice? Does it not mean that we are called to do the righteousness of God by giving up our own interest for the best interests of others, despite who they are? In the next issue, we will conclude this discussion and make relevant applications to our understanding of the mission of the church.

David French preaches for the Pine Valley Church of Christ in Wilmington.

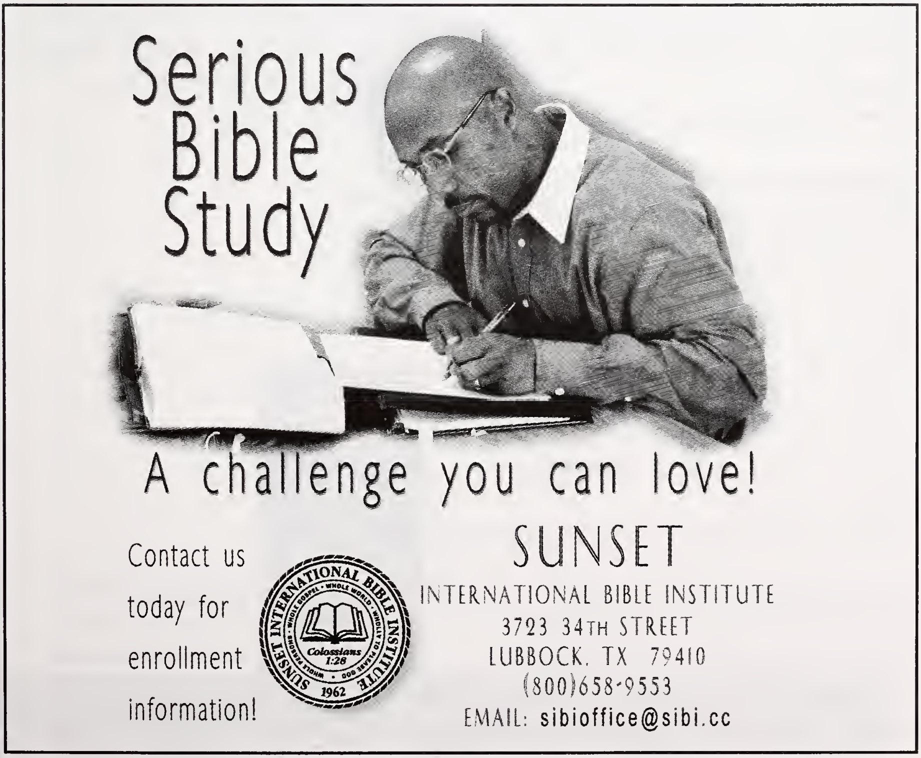
(A Thing of Beauty continued) and scribbling of those doomed children. The one motif that was found over and over was that of the butterfly. It seems remarkable that in a place of death was the symbol of resurrection.

May God grant all of us the courage and strength to break free of the cocoon, and may the world be in wonder at the beauty that God has created in us. Because, what a caterpillar calls death and the risk of the unknown, we call a butterfly.

Kent Massey can be contacted at 4900 Providence Rd., Charlotte, NC 28226.

(Tale of Two Cities continued) roadblock became the Macedonian call. God forced Paul to change his plans.

Some congregations function with the openness to "see what happens today." Other groups are very specific with goals and plans. God uses both. Jerusalem was very open to the will of God. Their reactionary style of ministry allowed for great flexibility. However, their slackness in planning may have allowed certain problems to escalate. In responding to crisis, the Jerusalem church was forced to become more proactive. Antioch, on the other hand, was very proactive. Their drive and thoroughness in planning spread the gospel. No wonder the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26). In their zeal for purpose-driven ministry, they suffered a tragic division among brethren, and they had to learn to be open to unexpected opportunities.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Brotherhood News

Mark Hudson

Huntersville, NC... The Lake Norman Church of Christ celebrated the dedication of its new church building with an open house on June 1. Rob Albright is the preacher for the Lake Norman congregation. The church office phone number is (704) 895-1155.

Lexington, SC... The Lexington Church of Christ also celebrated the dedication of its new church building. The new address for the church is 101 Ball Park Road, Lexington, SC 29072. The church website is www.lexingtonchurch.com.

Yadkinville, NC... This year's Small Church Workshop, hosted by the Yadkinville church, enjoyed record attendance with over 50 brothers and sisters from both Carolinas participating. The theme was "The Ways We Grow." Tapes of all the messages are available by contacting the church office at (336) 679-8924, or by e-mail at yadkinvillecoc@aol.com.

Sanford, NC... The Sanford Church of Christ will host Bible Bowl 2003 on Saturday, August 23. This year the Bible Bowl will cover 1 Timothy and Ephesians.

Corsicana, TX... F. Furman Kearley, former editor of the Gospel Advocate, passed from this life on March 1 at the age of 70. Kearley became editor of the Gospel Advocate (the oldest magazine in circulation among Churches of Christ) in 1985, retiring in 1999. In addition to his work as an editor, brother Kearley also taught and served as an administrator at five colleges and universities and authored the books "Biblical Interpretation" and "God's Indwelling Spirit". Funeral services were held on March 7 at the Westhill church of Christ in Corsicana, Texas.

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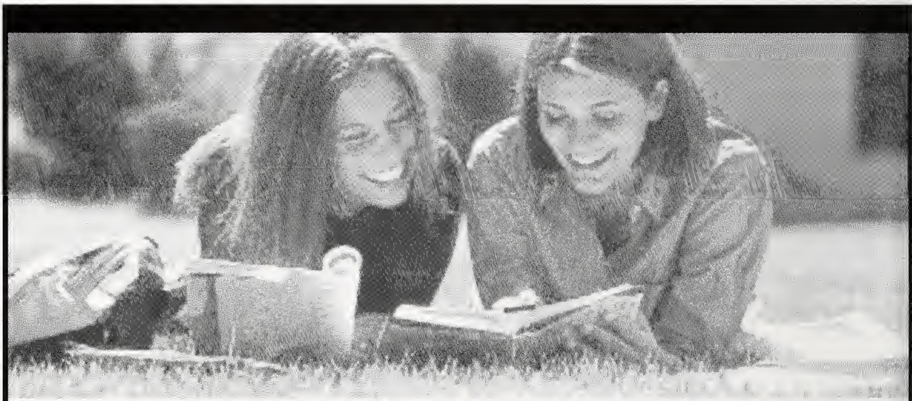

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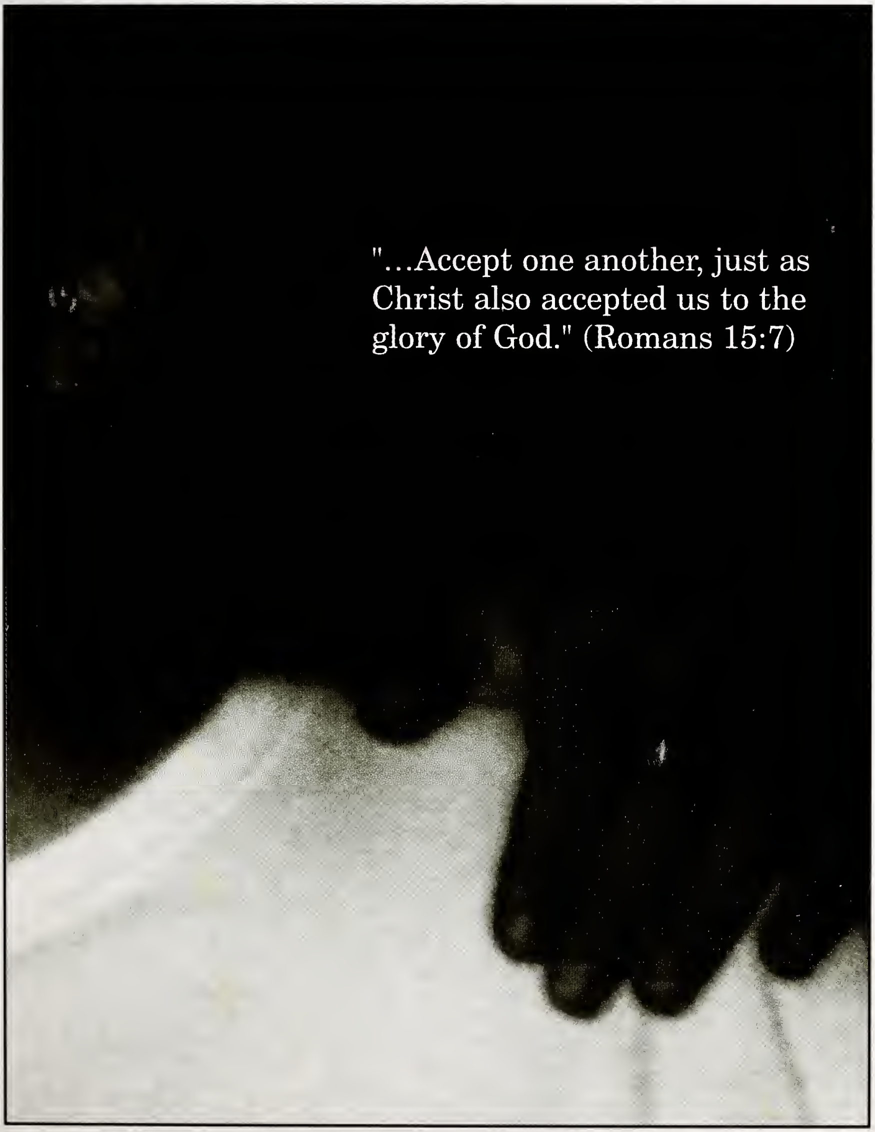

"...Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God." (Romans 15:7)

CAROLINA
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Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
Peyton Crump, Design Editor

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Dennis Conner
PO Box 1369
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Mark Hudson
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Unity Despite Diversity

Dennis Conner

Recently I attended a workshop that proved to be a great blessing for everyone present. The messages were biblically based, practical, and challenging. The worship did that which worship is intended to do — inspire awe of and declare heart-felt adoration for God. The fellowship was uplifting and edifying. Yet, perhaps the best compliment for the workshop came in the form of an observation of one of the brothers in attendance, who remarked to me, "The thing that really impresses me is the number of people with different perspectives who are here this year." None felt threatened; all felt a sense of acceptance in Christ. The workshop, in its own way, had struck a small but still noticeable blow against the sectarianism that so often betrays our claims to be a unity movement.

That we do have a serious problem with disunity is all too evident, and painfully so, to any rational minded person. The embarrassing irony of our present situation is that we are the heirs of what once aspired to be a great unity movement. That embarrassment has been all too personal as on numerous occasions through the years I have been asked by someone, "Are you like that church of Christ over on ______ Road?" I never handle that question well. "Well, yes, but then again, no," is often about the best that I can muster. How do I explain to the innocent, unsuspecting questioner that both congregations wear the same name, "church of Christ," but that one will have nothing to do with the other? How do I make sense of the fact that both share the same core beliefs, but the inability to agree on lesser issues creates obstacles and stumbling blocks on the road to unity? How do I explain our penchant for condemning and rejecting rather than accepting?

"The other option is for the brethren, on both sides of the controversy, to quit judging and condemning one another."

Paul wrote to a church that was struggling with these very attitudes (see Romans 14). As an integrated congregation (Jews and Gentiles), the church in Rome was experiencing serious conflict over eating laws (or the absence of them). The Jewish believers felt it was wrong to eat certain meats, while the Gentile believers were more than willing to belly up to the buffet bar. The problem was that each side was judging and condemning the other. Paul's ultimate instruction in the matter was: "stop judging one another...accept one another in the Lord."

Much is often made of the fact that the matters the Roman believers were struggling over were "matters of indifference." That is, they were not matters of faith (matters of salvation). Thus, the situation in Rome is not exactly parallel with the situation that exists among us today. What we are fighting over today, in contrast, are matters of faith and not matters of indifference (matters of opinion). So the argument goes.

However, what is often missed is that to the Jewish brothers, this matter of eating meats was a matter of faith. Otherwise, they would not have been judging their Gentile brothers who had no qualms about eating meat. We don't typically judge others over matters we don't feel are essential to our salvation. In many cases one man's opinion is another man's essential.

To take it one step further, Paul even implies that the Jewish brothers were doctrinally incorrect in their forbidding of meats. He said, "I know, by the authority of Jesus himself, that there is nothing wrong with it," (Romans 14:14). The Jewish brothers were wrong about this matter. Yet, Paul's initial word is to "accept one another," even though the Jewish Christians were wrong in their understanding. Do we understand the apostle to be saying that doctrinal beliefs are irrelevant? I don't think so. However, he is saying that both the Jewish and Gentile brothers must be willing to accept the other in spite of flawed and even wrongly held beliefs that are not part and parcel of the essential gospel (justification by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, the Christ who was dead and is now alive).

Paul further instructed the "spiritual" (the more spiritually mature and considerate) to take into account the conscience of the "weaker" brothers (those who forbade the eating of meats). In many controversies today this is typically the point that is focused on. In many of the controversies enveloping the church today ("styles" of worship, for instance), those who are opposed to certain practices will often argue, "What you are doing violates my conscience; therefore, you should stop doing it." (It is interesting that in Romans 14 those whose consciences were offended were called by Paul "weak in the faith." Rarely do folks today who oppose certain practices, appealing to Romans 14 as their rationale, admit to being the spiritually weak, or immature, ones!) While it is certainly true enough that Paul encourages the strong (those who are more spiritually mature) to willingly relinquish their freedom for the good and sake of their brothers, this is not the only option the apostle offers. The other option is for the brethren, on both sides of the controversy, to quit judging and condemning one another. If both sides of any given controversy could do this, there would be no need for the stronger to bear with the weaker for conscience sake.

Paul concluded his argument with an appeal to the model of Christ, "...Just as Christ has accepted you..." (15:7a). The question comes to mind, "And just how has Christ accepted us?" In our perfection? When at our best? Not! Jesus has accepted us in spite of our imperfections along with all our flaws and limited understanding. He has accepted us warts (spiritual and otherwise) and all.

And why are we to accept each other according to the model of Jesus himself? So that "God will be glorified," (15:7b). Our wrangling, our arguing, our backbiting, and our penchant for condemning do not glorify God. God is not glorified when each is pursuing his or her own agenda (even a "right" agenda can be pursued with wrong attitudes). On the other hand, his glory is accomplished by our willingness to look beyond ourselves, by our efforts to be patient with one another, and by our greater desire to build up than to tear down.

And if you don't agree with a thing I've written, that's all right. I'll accept you anyway, to the glory of God.

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Becoming Intolerant of Intolerance

Ron Newberry

An ancient Hebrew story recalls that Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, weary from age and journey of the day, coming toward him. Following the custom of the day concerning hospitality Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and invited him into his tent. Once comfortably seated Abraham washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink.

Hungry from the long journey, the old man immediately began eating without saying any prayer or offering any blessing. Abraham was startled and asked him, "Don't you worship God?"

"I worship fire only and revere no other god," replied the weary old traveler.

When he heard this, Abraham became indignant. Grabbing the old man by the shoulders, he threw him out of his tent into the cold night air. Watching until the traveler was out of sight, Abraham turned to reenter his tent. At that moment God called to his friend Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied, "I forced him out because he did not worship you."

God answered, "I have suffered him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?"

> "But regardless of what we believe on any issue — doctrine or opinion — let's treat one another with love and respect."

Being tolerant of others is a huge issue in our culture today. Society would have us tolerate every deviant aberrant behavior known to man. To claim any behavior is out of bounds is the height of intolerance and that is far worse (according to voices of culture) than any immoral or licentious behavior. In other words, our culture tolerates everyone and everything except legitimate criticism.

On the other hand, so many churches go to the opposite extreme. Hardly anything but the "official position" is tolerated. While most, if not all, of those who subscribe to intolerance among Christians maintain that their official position is from Scripture, claiming it is "God's position" doesn't make it so. I have a dog with normal anatomy. My calling her tail an ear doesn't mean that she has three ears. Maintaining that my personal tenaciously held position on some issue is God's position doesn't make it so.

We used to hear a statement that became our unofficial motto. "In matters of faith unity, in matters of opinion liberty, in all things charity." (I don't want to sound too cynical, but I wonder how well we have lived up to that motto to which we pledged our allegiance.) Actually, this wasn't coined by one of our leaders in the restoration movement. The original statement was worded a bit differently, but the essence of the thought remained in tact. First enunciated by Rupert Meldenius at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the motto originally said, "In fundamentals unity, in non-fundamentals (or "doubtful things") liberty, in all things charity." Regardless of who turned the phrases, the message is laudable. Where fundamental doctrines are concerned, let's unite. Where there are differences of opinion, let's be tolerant. But regardless of what we believe on any issue — doctrine or opinion — let's treat one another with love and respect. Many years ago I heard Alan Bryan say, "If we fought the devil as hard as we fought each other, we'd have him killed off tomorrow." Perhaps that's a bit hyperbolic, but then again maybe not much.

I have become increasingly convinced through the years that there are many issues over which we have drawn lines of fellowship that are not what may be called heaven-hell issues. At the same time I have also grown in my opinion that while many things are not heaven-hell issues, the way we treat one another and the attitudes we display toward one another may very well be heaven-hell issues.

Paul says in Romans 14 that brothers and sisters must accept one another and stop passing judgment on one another over disputable matters. That implies that there are matters over which we can have disputes. The major concern for Paul is how Christians treat one another while they work out the disputes and how they continue to remain brothers and sisters even if they never come to an agreement.

Maybe we should seek reconciliation instead of resolution of some concerns. Perhaps we need to become more intolerant of intolerance in disputable matters.

Unity in Direction and Attitude

Cecil May, Jr.

"Let's go back to the Bible. Let's be just what the apostles taught the church of the first century to be." This has been the plea of many "reformers" or "restorers" across the centuries.

Some who have followed that ideal, even at great sacrifice, went wide of the mark. The Amish, for example, focused primarily on rejection of modern clothing and technology. Others have come closer. We rightly honor certain pioneer preachers of the nineteenth century for their attempt to restore the "ancient order." I find myself in agreement with much of what they discovered. It would be impossible, however, to profess agreement with all they taught, since so many of them had widely different emphases and practiced widely different things.

Their unity did not consist of total agreement in everything they taught. It consisted in an attitude of humble submission to the word of God, which kept them moving in the direction of conformity to the will and way of Christ in all things.

We should not seek to be just like them, but we should seek what they sought.

Where people are at a given moment is certainly important, but even more significant is, "What direction are we going?" "Where are we headed?"

There are some whose doctrinal positions are in almost every instance the same as mine. Their primary allegiance, however, seems to be to a particular "camp" within the church with whom they have cast their lot, and their spirit seems to be one of caustic criticism and total rejection of anyone who differs with any of the selected views that define their camp.

On the other hand, there are some whose practice is also largely the same as mine, but who seem more concerned with "What do I want to do?" than with "What does the Bible say?"

Robert F. Turner, in a lecture at Florida College, said, "Two men who do the same thing religiously — one because he sincerely believes God wants it that way and the other because he likes it that way and has no intention of changing regardless of God's word — may be less unified than two men whose practice is different, but who are both sincerely searching for truth and are willing to conform to all truth found. The first two will drift further apart; the second

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Urgent Need!

Accommodation and Assimilation

Tim Sensing

The society we live in is rapidly changing; the world is in constant flux. We make value judgments on whether these changes are for the advancement of society or its downfall, but whatever our judgments, the avalanche of change cannot be reversed. The present generation is not experiencing anything new under the sun. God's people have always needed to respond in faith to a world that is ever changing.

Adaptation has been described in terms of "accommodation and assimilation." "Adaptation" refers to the process of adjusting thinking and actions to the environment. All biological systems adapt, for instance. As changes occur, our minds continually organize thoughts into new structures and patterns. "Assimilation" is the use of currently available knowledge and experiences. New information is sometimes distorted because we force it into our present knowledge base. Accommodation involves changing our thoughts to make better judgments regarding new information and experiences in order to reduce distortions.

The exile of God's people from the Promise Land and separation from the temple created crisis in Jewish faith. Some of Israel and Judah's kings tried to resist the

(continued on next page)

(*Unity* continued)

two will be drawn together in the paths of God." (Quoted by David Edwin Harrell, Jr., in The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century, University of Alabama Press, p. 363).

If we are in Christ, based on his gift of salvation, which we receive, by obedient faith, we can honor the fact that we are brothers. As we humbly and mutually submit to God's word, we will grow together in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. Two will not be as one for long if one seeks primarily to please himself or to be pronounced "sound" by his fellow "campers." They are destined to drift further apart and end at opposite poles.

Two can be one in Christ if both are steadfastly set on learning the will of the Lord, even if one of them is somewhat ahead of the other.

(*Accommodation* continued) invading forces (instruments of God's judgment). They failed. Other leaders in Israel tried to compromise faith in order to survive, only to arouse God's anger even more. Many prophets advocated various theories to help the people make sense out of a world that no longer resembled their heritage. These voices were not preserved in the canonical books (accepted Scripture). After the exile, the forms and patterns of Jewish religious life were different. The Jewish practices in Ezra's day had made many necessary accommodations. Some of these changes are reflected in the Gospels and cannot find their origin in Moses.

So, how do the people of God hold on to their faith and religious heritage when forces beyond their control make adaptation inevitable? In other words, how does one discern the difference between making changes that represent a faith response to God's action in the world and making changes that represent a departure from God's intended future? Perhaps the following examples will help in answering that question.

"Can we today adapt without compromising?"

As the children of Israel moved from Egypt to Canaan, they worshiped in the tabernacle. God later guided Solomon to construct a temple. No mention of a synagogue (which we only read about in the New Testament) is found in Israel's early history. Whether the origins of the synagogue can be traced back to preexilic times or not, the Israelites came back from Persia with the practice of synagogues in every community. There is no text that ordains the use of a synagogue. There is neither pattern for synagogue construction nor pattern for synagogue worship found in Scripture. Synagogues and their associated forms were a significant departure from the Temple heritage ordained by God. Yet it is obvious from the Gospels that God approved this accommodation. The exile forced God's people to adapt some of the externals of their faith, to assimilate some new understandings, so as to maintain the core of their faith.

Further, the story of Daniel gives us a concrete example about

(continued on next page)

You Have a Purpose!

Lindsey Garmon

None of us were born merely to take up space. You have a purpose, a God-given purpose.

You may feel inadequate. You may feel discouraged with how your life is going. You may not even feel that you've made a difference. But God has a purpose for your life.

Maybe you are struggling with a sense of failure. We have a tendency to write ourselves off — to say that God could never use us because we've made too many mistakes. However, the wonderful truth is that God can use us despite our failures. Check it out in Scripture. Again and again, God used broken people to accomplish his purposes. Abraham? A man who lied about his wife to protect his own skin.

(continued on next page)

(*Accommodation* continued)

their struggles to adapt to a new environment. The question: how far can you go and not violate your Jewish heritage and values? Can you be educated in Babylonian schools? Yes (Daniel 1:5, 17). Can you eat their foods? No (1:8ff). Can you change your name? Yes (1:7). Can you change your clothes? Yes (5:29). Can you receive their gifts? Sometimes (2:48; 5:17). Can you be in a position of power? Yes (2:48; 5:29). Can you serve other gods? No (3:18; 6:10). Daniel used discernment with his prayer life in making the difference. Daniel made some changes that allowed him to adapt while refusing other changes that would cause him to compromise.

Can we today adapt without compromising? Yes! Adaptation requires the ability to distinguish between that which is essential and that which is external, cultural and opinion. The inability to recognize sacred traditions contrasted with human traditions has divided our movement from its inception. Sometimes I may make a different decision about those opinions than my brother. Sometimes whole congregations may choose differently about external matters. As long as the cross of Christ is not compromised, we need to accept one another. I am convinced that the wisdom necessary for us to remain in the will of God comes only from a heart fully trusting in God.

(*Purpose* continued)
Moses? A murderer. David? An adulterer and a murderer. Peter? An impetuous coward.

You may be sitting on the sidelines thinking, "I've blown it. God can't use me." But you were born for a purpose. No matter how badly you've blown it, God can still use you. In fact, God loves to use broken people.

Could it be that you're too focused on your weaknesses and not focused enough on God's power? When God appeared to Moses and gave him an assignment, Moses' immediate response was, "Wait a minute, God. You have the wrong person! I don't have what it takes."

There it is. That's what we do. We spend our time looking at our weaknesses rather than God's ability. Some people overestimate their usefulness to God, but a more common mistake is to think that God can't use us because we're too weak.

God can make a difference through us when we rely on his power. When God called Moses and issued a mission assignment, he gave Moses three promises. First, God said, "Serve me, Moses. I will be with you," (Exodus 3:12). When we serve God, we never serve alone. Second, God promised to compensate for Moses' weaknesses. He said, "Moses, who made your mouth?" (Exodus 4:11-12). And third, God provided another person to assist — Aaron. This man was able to supply what Moses lacked (Exodus 4:14-15).

You have a purpose. God will help you to fulfill it!

Lindsey Garmon may be contacted at Lindsey@brooks.org.

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Real Men Part 4: Sexual Purity In and Out of Marriage

Russ Jurek

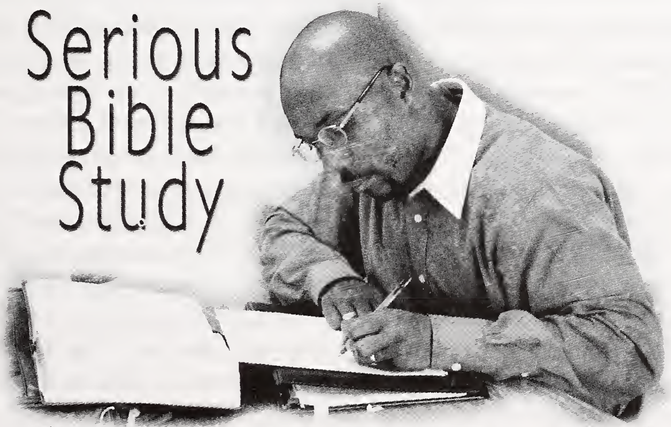
"Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body." (1 Corinthians 6:18-20)

The sexual revolution of the 60's has made sexual purity a concept that seems as outdated as Transistor Radios and 33 LPs. The sexual "freedom" exercised in the world today has exploded in our collective faces. This freedom has brought dramatic increases in STD's, AIDS, abortion, teen and other unwanted pregnancies, adultery (masked as "affairs") and divorce rates. Instead of finding greater sexual satisfaction, many couples are experiencing more problems with intimacy and sexuality within their marriages. "Sexual Freedom," hardly! The reality is that Satan has simply pulled more people into bondage to him through this "revolution." If you're thinking, "That's the world but we in the church don't have that problem," think again. Just in the last few years, I have personally counseled and/or been aware of two preachers, one elder and a deacon's wife who each committed adultery. I have also worked with 6 pregnant teens and their families all from the church. Though we should be, we are not immune. Christians have fallen to sexual temptation both inside and outside of marriage at a rate not too far behind the rest of the world. We wonder why our families are in trouble! If we are ever going to stop the moral decay of sexual purity in and out of marriage, two things must happen:

First, we have to teach our young men to prepare themselves to be leaders in their families by remaining sexually pure before marriage. We must help them stand up to peer pressure and say no to premarital sex. We must be willing to talk to our children about sex. Sex is a wonderful gift from God to married couples. Let's stop being afraid to talk about it and start presenting God's view of sexuality! This is the best way I know to counteract all the "teaching" our kids are getting from TV, movies, music, etc.

Second, husbands must commit to being sexually pure inside their marriages. Consider the words of the wise man as he warns us against adultery in Proverbs 5:15-20: "Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer — may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?" Husbands, if you are involved in pornography by magazines, videos or the internet, get rid of this stuff and commit to sexual purity in your marriage. If you have an addiction, get help with it before it destroys your marriage and your life.

Husbands and Dads, let's build up and protect our families by being Real Men who are committed to sexual purity and teaching our children the same!



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Acan All Over Again

Paul Jarrett

In Joshua 7, we have an account of how a man named Acan was stoned to death after the Israelites lost a battle they should have won because God was angered by his sin. I have told people that Acan's name is an easy one to recall if we just think how we would feel if we had been pummeled with stones!

I mention this because I believe there is a lesson to be learned from the story of Acan. God told Joshua that He had withdrawn His support because, "Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them," (Joshua 7:11ff). I wonder how many churches are hurting today because God is withholding His blessing for the same reason? Are we "Acan all over again?"

When I speak of sin in a church, I am not referring to the sins with which individual members struggle. Rather, I am referring to those sins which might be described as systemic (i.e., of or relating to a system). These are the kind of sins which come to be a part of our identity, at least in the eyes of outsiders. These systemic sins may take other forms, but here are four that I have observed.

The sin of invalidating the word of God for the sake of our traditions. We are all too familiar with the fact that Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for being guilty of this sin. Unfortunately, our familiarity is largely due to our tendency to apply Jesus' words to the false doctrine of others. However, the context of Jesus' rebuke would seem to suggest that many of us are sometimes guilty of this sin. In context, Jesus is condemning those whose traditions allowed them to avoid the greater responsibilities of the law. The example He used pertains to those who justified their neglect of their parents by claiming they had committed their resources to God. I wonder how many churches have justified their refusal to engage in some work of service because it might require them to associate with someone who did not concur with them on every point of doctrine? How often have we sacrificed our role as the salt of the earth on the altar of some religious tradition?

The sin of having left our "first love." This sin is closely related to the previous one. The church in Ephesus was known for their doctrinal soundness. Unfortunately, in their haste to identify and chastise false teachers their own priorities had become skewed. They had left their first love. As a result, they were in danger of having their lamp stand extinguished. How many churches among us have made this same mistake? While it is commendable that we combat error, we must not neglect the performance of weightier matters such as justice, mercy and faithfulness. We sacrifice our influence when we are known more for our doctrinal idiosyncrasies than we are for our love.

The sin of hypocrisy. The most commonly heard reason people offer for wanting nothing to do with church is the perceived hypocrisy of so many Christians. I am sure that in many cases this accusation is more of an excuse than a reason. It is often without merit, particularly when applied to individuals who are simply struggling with their own weaknesses. It is a misperception to believe that Christians must be perfect. As has often been noted, "We are not perfect, just forgiven." Having said that, however, we must acknowledge the fact that hypocrisy can become systemic. This happened to the Jews when they took pride in what they knew, but failed to practice what they preached (Romans 2:17-24). I wonder how many churches today are causing God's name to be blasphemed because their conduct is not measuring up to their proclamation? A lack of growth should not surprise us when the members of a church are known in the community for their immorality, shady business practices and inability to get along with others.

The sin of claiming to be wealthy when we are really poor. The church at Laodecia made Christ sick. They were materially rich, but spiritually destitute. I fear this may describe many churches in America. We have fine buildings. We have outstanding preaching. We have many wonderful programs. Unfortunately, all of these things are often designed for the personal benefit of our members. Like the rich man in Luke 16, we are "joyously living in splendor every day" with only token charity being shown to the beggar at our gate. God tells us that if we want to truly be a light to the world, we must become a church that will "give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted," (Isaiah 58:10ff).

By the grace of God, let us be cleansed of the sins and attitudes that keep us from enjoying the blessings of God.

Paul Jarrett can be contacted at 1450 Mandarin Rd., Naples, FL 34102. He serves the Naples Church of Christ.

Our Awesome God

Jerry Senn

Moses and the people were in the desert, but what was he going to do with them? They had to be fed, and feeding 2 million people requires a lot of food! According to the Quartermaster General of the Army, it is estimated that Moses would have to have had 1500 tons of food each day. Do you know that to bring that much food each day, two freight trains (each at least a mile long) would be required?

Besides, you must remember that they were out in the desert, so they would have to have firewood to use in cooking the food. This would take 400 tons of wood and a few more freight trains, each a mile long, just for one day. And, just think, they were forty years in transit.

And, oh yes! They would have to have water. If they only had enough to drink and wash a few dishes, it would take 11,000,000 gallons a day and a freight train with tank cars 1,800 miles long just to bring water?

Then, another thing! They had to get across the Red Sea at night. Now, if they went on a narrow path, double file, the line would be 800 miles long and would require 35 days and nights to get through. So there had to be space in the Red Sea three miles wide to that they could walk 500 abreast to get over in one night.

But then there is another problem. Each time they camped at the end of the day, a campground two-thirds the size of the state of Rhode Island was required (a total of 750 square miles). Think of it!

Do you think Moses figured all this out before he left Egypt? I think not. You see, Moses believed in God, and God took care of these things for him. Now, do you think God has any problem taking care of all your needs?

"...Let's remember that our God has awesome power."

When we feel helpless and too weak to cope with our daily struggles, let's remember that our God has awesome power. And, even more than this, he loves us enough to supply every one of our needs according to his riches in glory (Philippians 4:19).

"And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Jerry Senn can be contacted at hvcoc@brinet.com.

Spring Cleaning

Kent Massey

I cleaned out my office desk drawer the other day. I got the clue it was time because I couldn't close it anymore without pressing my shoulder against it, and I couldn't open it without fear of exploding projectiles of paper whistling through the air.

It's amazing the things I discovered:

·An unused Barnes and Noble gift card from 1998;

·The tape that my friend Curt let me borrow and that I promised I had returned to him at least three years ago;

·A Lands End catalog with dog-eared pages of items Vallarie had asked me to order. I guess she didn't really want them because I never did, and she hasn't mentioned it (I hope she doesn't read this);

·The other half of that Snickers bar I was eating for lunch six months ago. I wonder what the post-opened shelf life is for one of those?

Maybe you have guessed that I am a pack rat. I will save anything and everything with the belief that somewhere, sometime, somehow it will be needed. It pains me to get rid of "stuff."

If you surveyed the "ABCD's" of every home (attics, basements, closets and drawers), many of us would have to admit we have an "ABCD" problem. How in the world does all that clutter, that clogged space and glut of garbage, get into our attics, our basements, our closets and our drawers? Try as we might, it seems it never gets cleaned up or cleared out.

"The psalmist discovers a God who cannot count."

But here is something I have learned about attics, basements, closets and drawers. They serve the same purpose that secret thoughts, hidden agendas, and dark desires do in our lives — they hold the things we would never want exposed to the light and plain sight, those things that are part of us, but not the part we put on display.

The Puritans of New England had a quick and concise way to define all these hidden places and pieces of our lives — SIN. The New England Primer (which was used to teach young people the alphabet) had as its first entry, and the first lesson of every day, this little ditty: "A is for Adam. In Adam's fall, we sinned all."

The Puritan child understood from his or her earliest lesson that each of us has a sin problem. Each of us are moral failures and have moral failings that can be mortal. Each of us has a cupboard, corner or cubby-hole of our heart where we do not want anyone to see what is hidden there. The cluttered attics, basements and closets of our lives hide the secret stash of failures, disappointments and heartaches of our fallen existence.

There is a gravitational force in all of us, and it is called sin. Sin is a force that pulls us downward. It is what fills up our inward attics, basements, closets and drawers with the junk of this world. Sin has been defined as our refusal to let God be God.

The psalmist new some things we need to always remember:

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning. O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins" (Psalm 130).

The psalmist is propping open his attic door, turning the lights on in the basement, swinging wide the crawl space door, opening every closet door and pulling out all the drawers of his life. He is subjecting himself to God's spring cleaning. And he doesn't like the garbage and junk that has piled up, because once he sees himself as he really is, the hideous existence of all the "stuff" in his life sends him spiraling in despair and guilt.

He sees the sins that are there, and they are obvious. But he doesn't try to explain them away, rationalize (which simply means rational lies) or deny them. All he can do is look at his mess and cry out to the one who can help, "Lord, hear my voice!"

What is amazing is that God does! The psalmist discovers a God who cannot count. A God whose accounting methods have been tossed aside and replaced with an eternal forgiveness, constant love and saving grace.

He is a God who will not tolerate sin, but he is also a God who would rather die than live without us. He is a God who demands our lives to be clean and holy, but he is also a God full of mercy and compassion. He is a God who refuses to lower the standard, but he is also a God who raises us up to the standard through the power of the resurrected Jesus Christ.

I have come to realize that I like my desk drawer better now that I don't have to use so much pressure to shut it, nor have so much fear when I open it up. My goal is to keep my desk drawer as clean as I can because it looks better, feels better, and can be better used for its intended purpose.

Maybe God wants us to stay clean for the same reasons. We look better, feel better and we can be used for His intended purposes. The challenge is always staying clean.

Mary was the class slob. Everybody knew that Mary always had the messiest and dirtiest desk of any of her classmates. One day Mary's teacher announced to the class that she was going to be gone for several weeks. She encouraged the class to keep their desks clean while she was gone and if they did, she would reward the student who had the cleanest desk with a prize when she returned.

Mary spoke up and said, "I want to win that award!" Everybody laughed at her bravado.

One little boy said, "No way! You can't keep your desk clean." Mary said, "I will clean it the first of every week."

The boy asked, "But what if she comes at the end of the week?"

"I'll clean my desk the first thing every morning," Mary replied.

"But what is she comes back at the end of the day?" the boy retorted.

Mary thought for a long moment and said, "Well, I just have to keep my desk clean."

Let's keep ourselves clean, because you never know when the Master will return. And that means making sure the attics, basements, closets and drawers of our lives are clean and ready for inspection.

"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3).

Kent Massey can be contacted at 4900 Providence Rd., Charlotte, NC 28226, or by e-mail at Kmassey@prcoc.org.

Spiritual Warfare (Part 1)
Ephesians 6:10-17

Paul Jarrett

Our text for this study presents a side of spiritual warfare which differs from the apostle Paul's usual approach to this subject. In other texts Paul focuses on the spiritual warfare which wages within us in our personal battle with temptation, sin and the devil. However, in this text, Paul focuses on those external foes which we may encounter in this spiritual warfare, which we are called on to participate in as soldiers of Christ.

While the focus of Ephesians 6:10-17 differs from other texts in which Paul discusses spiritual warfare, I believe a study of some of these other texts can be helpful in our understanding of this text. I say that because I believe these other texts provide insight into the basic nature of the spiritual conflict in which we are involved. By coming to appreciate what lies at the heart of this conflict, we can better fight the good fight, which Paul tells us to fight. Therefore, in part one of this study, I want us to examine the lessons to be learned from a number of these texts.

OUR STRUGGLE IS A PRODUCT OF OUR FLESHLY NATURE

In Romans 7:14-23, Paul uses his own experience to call attention to the fact that the root cause of all spiritual warfare has to do with the fact that we are dual beings — flesh and spirit. No matter how good our intentions may be, we are all frustrated and often defeated by our fleshly nature. We can all identify with Paul's words when he writes: "For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want."

Paul is not alone in identifying our fleshly nature to be the reason for the spiritual warfare which wages within us. John describes sin as consisting of "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" (I John 2:15). James makes a similar point when he describes the path to sin in these words, "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust" (James 1:14).

God recognized the fact that man's struggle with sin was rooted in his fleshly nature when He said at the time of the flood, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh" (Genesis 6:3). The temptations and the troubles, which befall us in the flesh, have led many to follow Job's lead in questioning why God made us the way He did (see Job 10). While it is not within the scope of this brief study to address this question in depth, I believe the answer may be found in the story of Job. Satan is able to tempt Job because he is a man of flesh. Job could have chosen to curse God because he had freedom of choice. Instead, Job won a great victory for God by maintaining his faith in the midst of this spiritual conflict. In return, "The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning" (Job 42:12).

Job's story is a microcosm of the spiritual warfare in which we are all engaged as Christians. However, we do have an advantage over Job. In Christ, we have the things for which Job longed. We know the answer to the great question, "If a man dies, will he live again?" (Job 13:14). In Christ, we have the Advocate for whom Job longed (cf. Job 9:32,33 & I John 2:1). Christ is able to sympathize with our struggles because He has experienced life in the flesh, and He can intercede for us because He has conquered sin in the flesh on our behalf (Hebrews 2:14-18).

THE BATTLE IS JOINED WHEN WE ARE BAPTIZED

In Romans 6:3-14, Paul identifies baptism as that point in our lives as Christians that marks our decision to engage in spiritual warfare with our fleshly nature. Among other things, Paul writes, "Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin."

Baptism is the beginning of our struggle with sin, not the end. Much of what Paul says regarding the significance of baptism in Romans 6 is written to call attention to the need to continue to live in accordance with the choice we made at baptism: to be "dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Paul sets forth the on-going nature of this struggle in even clearer terms in his epistle to the Colossians.

OUR ON-GOING STRUGGLE

In Colossians 3:1-17, Paul writes at length of the importance of our continuing to live our lives in accordance with the commitment we made when we were baptized. He exhorts, "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth." He goes on to talk about our death to the things pertaining to our earthly bodies and our commitment to living every aspect of our life in accordance with the new self we have become in Christ. Paul's exhortation presents us with a practical application of what Jesus must have had in mind when He said, "...If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23, emphasis mine).

Paul is writing from his own experience when he describes this on-going struggle with the flesh. He said of his own commitment to Christ, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). Paul also said this about the on-going nature of this struggle: "I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified" (I Corinthians 9:27).

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

If we are going to be victorious in this spiritual conflict, we must take advantage of the spiritual disciplines that are available to us. I want to conclude Part One of this study by calling your attention to some of the tactics Paul used (and recommended) to discipline his body and make it his slave. The importance of our doing this is seen in what Paul told Timothy when he wrote, "...Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1Timothy 4:7ff, 8). Here are a few spiritual disciplines we all need to practice:

1. BIBLE STUDY:

Paul urged Timothy to "give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" (I Timothy 2:13). On another occasion he told him to "be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth. But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness" (2 Timothy 2:15,16). Paul's emphasis on the need to study God's word is understandable in light of this quote: "All Scripture is inspired of God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

2. PRAYER:
Paul wrote to Timothy of the need to view prayer as a matter of first importance (1 Timothy 2:1,2). Paul wanted "men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension" (1 Timothy 2:8). Paul told the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer, especially when accompanied by fasting, serves to call attention to the priority which we are to place on things of the Spirit as opposed to the things of the flesh.

3. THE LORD'S SUPPER:
While we tend to focus on the Lord's Supper as a memorial of Christ, Paul also suggests that, when accompanied by self-examination, it can serve as a valuable spiritual discipline. He writes of how many at Corinth were spiritually weak, and some were even spiritually dead, as a result of their failure to examine themselves in partaking of the bread and drinking of the cup. He writes, "But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world" (see 1 Corinthians 11:27-32). A proper appreciation of the Lord's Supper will serve as a regular reminder to us of our own commitment to be crucified with Christ and to walk in newness of life.

4. SPIRITUAL EXERCISE:
In order to have a healthy body we must exercise regularly. Likewise, our spiritual health requires exercise. Spiritual exercise begins when we present our bodies to God as a living and holy sacrifice (Romans 12:1). Spiritual exercise involves the use of our gifts to serve God (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Timothy 4:14-16). Spiritual exercise may also include the use of our material goods to serve God's purpose (2 Corinthians 8:7; 1 Timothy 6:17-20). Ultimately, spiritual exercise means, "in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, [you are to] show yourself an example of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:12ff).

Finish What You Start

Ron Newberry

God's Little Devotional Book for Leaders, by Honor Books, is a compilation of inspirational anecdotes that stress courage, persistence, integrity, etc. These general attributes of leadership are essential in church leadership and in mature Christians.

One story included in the book involves the Brooklyn Bridge, which links Manhattan with Brooklyn. Ulysses S. Grant signed the bill approving the Brooklyn Bridge plan in 1869 and ground clearing began almost immediately. Bridge building experts worldwide offered their opinions. Almost unanimously they agreed that what was being planned was folly and unworkable.

John Roebling, the designer and creative engineer of the project, was undeterred. He and his son Washington, also an engineer, double checked their calculations and were convinced that their plan would work. Together, they anticipated potential problems and determined how they would resolve them. They assembled a huge crew and began building the bridge on January 2, 1870.

Unfortunately, during the preparation phase before the actual construction began, John Roebling was involved in a fatal accident. This left his son Washington in charge. Early in the summer of 1872 Washington was stricken with a debilitating disease that left him almost totally paralyzed and speechless. He supervised the remainder of the construction from his bedroom. Using his wife Emily as a liaison, Washington tapped out a code on her arm telling her what to communicate to the construction workers. The bridge was finished and opened for traffic on May 24, 1883. That means that Washington Roebling spent eleven years tapping out messages so he could finish what he started.

The apostle Paul could no doubt identify with Washington Roebling. Hounded, persecuted, imprisoned, shipwrecked; Paul knew about adversity. However, he kept his eyes lifted toward the next exciting city where he would preach the gospel. He kept looking westward to Spain even while under duress. Beyond Spain, he kept his eyes focused on heaven. He would tell his friend Timothy that he had fought the good fight and finished the race (2 Tim. 4:7). The apostle Paul and Washington Roebling illustrate some important life lessons. Finishing what we start is vital to the work we undertake for the Lord. Congregations

(continued on next page)

Burn the Ships!

Peter Rode

"No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62)

Repentance is an essential element of conversion and turning to God. After healing the lame man at the Beautiful Gate, Peter, in his

(continued on next page)

(*Finish* continued)

have always had members who begin their Christian walk with enthusiasm only to quit when things get tough. Our churches have always had members who make commitments to ministries, to committees, and to various works of the church only to withdraw at crucial times. Our churches have always had leaders who serve as long as the waters are calm but who bail out when the waters get choppy. Our churches have always had preachers who are great at beginnings but lacking in finishes.

If we had churches filled with members who were as committed to the growth of the church as Washington Roebling was to the Brooklyn Bridge, we would see an incredible surge in love and good deeds. There would be more conversions in North and South Carolina than we could accurately track. We would see people's lives changed at unprecedented rates.

If we had churches filled with members who were as committed to heaven as Paul was, we would see a surge in churches that are characterized by living sacrifices. There would be more money given to churches than ever before to reach out to the lost. There would be less and less interest in the material things of earth that are all going to pass away, and more and more interest in treasures in heaven that can't be destroyed, deflated or dissolved.

The mark of a leader, the mark of spiritual maturity is not necessarily found in fresh new ideas for some new ministry or exciting program. The mark of great leaders, the mark of mature individuals, is they are not deterred by objections, not derailed by obstacles and not discouraged by obscurity. They sacrifice whatever it takes to finish the work they began, because the goal is worthy.

Ron Newberry can be contacted at n2water@hotmail.com.

(*Burn the Ships* continued)
address to the crowd that formed on Solomon's Porch, tells them, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord..." (Acts 3:19). The word "repentance" means a change of mind. An individual changes one's mind about the way he or she is living and consequently changes their direction of life. Instead of serving sin and living for self, the individual now consciously decides to serve God. These are the only two alternatives: self or God, sin or righteousness.

True repentance is a commitment that comes from deep within, a conviction. I remember that as a smoker I was often encouraged and admonished to give up the habit. I did try on a number of occasions but wasn't successful until I was convicted from within that that was what I truly wanted and needed to do. Then, it was simple. I quit and was never again tempted to pick up another cigarette. But that conviction had to come from deep within me. Others could not impose it on me.

The problem in our Christian walk is that we often commit our lives to God, intending to walk with him, but because of the weakness of the flesh and the persistent nature of the enemy (Satan), our will wavers and we turn back to the elements of the life we left behind. Our repentance is not complete and like pigs we wallow in the mud all over again (2 Peter 2:22).

When one has truly repented, he is ready to stand firm in his decision. If you waver in your commitment to stay away from sin, repentance is not complete. When the Israelites stood on the shores of the Red Sea, Moses told them, "...Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today" (Exodus 14:13). They needed to be resolute in their decision to leave Egypt and to place their trust and their lives in Almighty God before moving on. So must we. Repentance means a complete about face. It means realizing just how wrong the action or thought or attitude is, and never wanting to do it again.

When we make a commitment to Christ, we need to follow the example of Hernando Cortez, who landed in Mexico near Vera Cruz on March 4, 1519. He burned his ships to cut off all thought of retreat in the minds of his soldiers, and started his march towards the Mexican capital, Tenochtitlan (Mexico City). He was determined to conquer the land. So we must be just as determined to want to follow the Lord

(continued on next page)

Why Him?

Clay Myers

It is 8:00 a.m. I am sitting outside at a small card table on the recreation yard here at the prison. As I look around, I see many men running, exercising, some playing bridge, and some having Bible study. One thing that sticks out more than any other is the razor-wire fence that surrounds us all. It is at this moment I find myself asking, "Why me?"

So many today are unhappy with the life that they are living. It is hard to find contentment in anything. This problem has touched the masses and has been the occasion for much strife and turmoil. Divorce, murder, substance abuse — these are all consequences of unhappy, miserable and discontented lifestyles. How can we alleviate this unhappiness? First we must locate the source.

Guy N. Woods once wrote: "It is fundamentally true that the secret of a good life does not lie necessarily in circumstances that are friendly, but in internal resources of character which enable us to triumph

(continued on page 31)

(*Burn the Ships* continued)

and become like him. Repentance must be like making a decision, once and for all, that will never be reversed. It's taking steps to rid oneself of anything that might cause one to slide back into sin.

Jesus said that if anything causes us to sin, however deep seated it might be, it must be removed. Even if it seems to be a necessary part of our lives, if it causes us to sin we must get rid of it (Matthew 5:29-30). That may sound drastic, but Jesus meant it to sound drastic because sin is serious and could keep us out of heaven. Repentance and living a holy life isn't simply a game we play. Fooling ourselves won't fool God.

When next the conviction of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8) brings you to your knees — and there will be a next time — repent and allow God to remove anything and everything that causes you to sin. Beg him to remove these things. Burn your ships! Don't be like the Israelites who always wanted to return to Egypt.

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Peter Rode can be contacted at 5101 W. Friendly Ave., Greensboro, NC 27410, or by e-mail at: prode@rocketmail.com.

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(*Why Him* continued)
over difficulties." We are all guilty of blaming our surroundings and circumstances for our discontent. "If only the situation were different," we have all said. It's much easier to blame our surroundings instead of ourselves.

Now we see the source of our discontent: it is a character flaw that comes from within. How can we overcome this fuel for unhappiness? It is essential that we find the way to joy and hope even in the darkest hour. Jesus is the answer.

Lately I have set out to spend more time with Jesus at the cross. After all, that is where all our answers are found. Jesus our King, our Savior. Without him we would all find ourselves in deep trouble! As we read about the earthly life of Christ, we see the most wonderful and perfect being in the history of mankind. He is our example, our guide, and he has left us a pattern to follow.

In looking at the crucifixion, I am sensitive to the grave injustice that was experienced by our Savior. His life was perfect, yet he was punished by being mocked, beaten and ultimately murdered. He is the Son of God, who had done nothing to deserve what he endured. This is where our pain surfaces. It is our fault that Jesus died on the cross. Our sins were responsible for the injustice and condemned him to the horrid death that he experienced, and he did it willingly on our behalf. Jesus of Nazareth bore the sins of people who hate and despise him. Understanding all of this, as I sit out in the prison yard, I must really ask, "Why him?"

Why did Jesus have to endure the punishment that we caused and deserved? He is righteous and we are unworthy. The more I ponder this subject, the more I am inclined to not care at all about the environment I find myself in. This is the point I've been getting at.

Throughout Scripture, we see in precept and example that we are to love God and to serve him with all our heart regardless of our surroundings. The primitive Christians were bombarded by persecution for living according to God's will. The persecution (and challenges) we experience today may be different, but we must still respond in the same way.

In Acts 26, Paul went before King Agrippa, Bernice, Festus and many officials. He had been in prison for over two years and now was his opportunity to make his case. "Please, please, let me out of here. I cannot take this any longer! I am an innocent man! I've done nothing wrong. I beg you, please let me go!" That is what we want to

(continued on next page)

A Call to Latvia: A Plea to Evangelize a Baltic State

Victor Barviks is the son of Latvian immigrants who met and married in the United States. Now he is serving the church Riga, the capital of Latvia. We are pleased to be able to make the readers of Carolina Christian aware of the kingdom's growth and brother Barviks' work in this nation.

Latvia is the middle Baltic State, with a population of approximately 2.3 million. The city of Riga has over 700,000 inhabitants. Having regained her independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Latvia now enjoys a democratic parliamentary government. Composed of a mix of nationalities, Latvians make up a little over half of the population and Russians nearly one-third. The dominant religion, as is typical in the

(continued on next page)

(*Why Him* continued)

say today. However, as we read the account, we know that Paul did not respond in any such manner.

Paul concerned himself with one thing only: the cause of Christ. Paul was a soul-winner. He said at another time, "I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content," (Philippians 4:11). This attitude is clearly shown in Acts 26 before kings and rulers. Paul, even in his chains, was trying to convert King Agrippa and his audience. He was focused on Christ, not his personal circumstances.

This is what we are to be doing. The only way we will ever be content is by putting our hope in Jesus Christ, who alone is capable of saving us (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Jesus is the answer for all our problems.

Dear brethren, I would not have you be ignorant of this. I know first-hand where contentment lies. I have been through it all. Material possessions cannot fill the emptiness. God and God alone can supply us with eternal joy and contentment. This is something Paul understood very well, which should give us hope since he was merely human, like the rest of us. Rely on the promises of God and we will never be wanting.

The next time we start blaming our surroundings and circumstances for our unhappiness, let us ask ourselves, "Why him?" Look to Jesus. Contentment is not in things, but a Person.

Clay Myers may be contacted at 17123-056 C-E, P.O. Box 2000, Butner, NC 27509.

Brotherhood News

Raleigh, NC... At the Brooks Ave. Church of Christ, beginning in June, Lindsey Garmon began a six-part sermon series, "What Must I Do To Be Saved," looking at the conversions in Acts. The number of responses and one-on-one studies being set up as a result of these messages is encouraging. "In order to be effective in our outreach to the lost, we must as Christians have a clarity of message and not be afraid of the power of God's Word and the changing effect it has on the hearts of lost people. Baptism for the forgiveness of sins is a necessary part of God's gracious plan of salvation by faith and we are, and must be, happy to proclaim it as such. God will bless that" says Garmon. Brooks Avenue has also added another staff minister: John Greenwood has been added on as Outreach Minister charged with the role of helping the body of Christians at Brooks re-focus and

(continued on next page)

(*Latvia* continued)

former Soviet republics, is Russian Orthodoxy. The next most common is Roman Catholicism, followed by Lutheranism. There are also many other religious groups represented, but churches of Christ are very few. Barviks was born in America but has been exposed to the Latvian language from childhood, which has proven to be a great advantage to his work in Riga. He has both a bachelor's and master's degree in civil engineering, but later graduated from the Southern California School of Evangelism in 1992 and Sunset's School of Missions in 1993. He is the only long-term missionary working with the Riga congregation, which was established in 1993. His wife, Sarmite, and stepson, Bruno, are native Latvians.

The work in Riga has several urgent needs:

·Rental of a small teaching room (or rooms) for conducting individual and group Bible studies ($500/month)
·Additional support funds of $1000/month
·Short-term workers
·Prayers for the work in Latvia

The Colony Church of Christ in The Colony, Texas, sponsors Barviks' ministry. If interested in gaining more information about this work, you may contact the church by phone at (972) 625-6655, or by e-mail at sandy@tccchurch.org. You can contact Victor Barviks by e-mail at vbarviks@yahoo.com, or barviks@latnet.lv.

(*Brotherhood News* continued) recommit to "seeking and saving the lost." John has served in congregations in North Carolina and Maryland since 1978 and is "delighted to be back home at Brooks where I was baptized in 1972." On a "related" note, Marina Greenwood, John's wife, has written a very thorough booklet entitled, Known by God: Bad News & Good News About Being Born Again. "The booklet is designed to encourage Christians about their message of salvation and is also designed for anyone who may be searching for God's truth about salvation, baptism, and what true faith and grace really are. The booklet is easy to read with personal experiences and examples. It has been very effective in 'turning folks on to finding out more' about God's truth." With the new school year starting, the campus ministry at Brooks is more focused and more excited than ever with intern ministers on both the NCSU and UNC campuses. Bringing as many guests as possible to group events and group Bible studies with the aim toward one-on-one Bible studies is going to be the major focus for the Brooks' Christian students on these campuses. "It will be a turning point year," says Brooks Campus Minister Donnie Williams. The Mid-Atlantic Evangelism Seminar planned for September 19-21 will have the theme "Go Light Your World." "The planners of the seminar wanted each and every Christian in attendance to gather the inspiration and the practical tools and ideas necessary to be more effective in lighting the world where they live and work with the ultimate goal of 'winning as many as possible' to Jesus Christ. Please mark your calendars and come," says John Greenwood.

Huntersville, NC... The updated address for the Lake Norman Church of Christ is 17634 Caldwell Station Rd., Huntersville, NC 28078. The church office phone number is (704) 895-1155. Their website location is www.lakenormancoc.org.

Cedar Park, TX... All of us at Carolina Christ extend our heartfelt congratulations and thanks to World Bible School, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. Established by Jimmie Lovell in 1973, this extensive evangelism program (that makes use of Bible correspondence courses) has been used by God to teach millions around the world and has led to the salvation of untold thousands of souls. Tex Williams has served as the Director since 1987. For more information about World Bible School, go to their website at www.wbschool.org.

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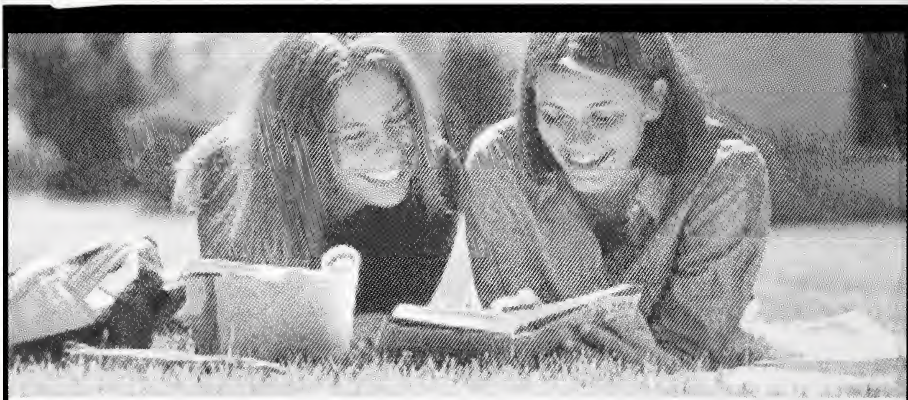

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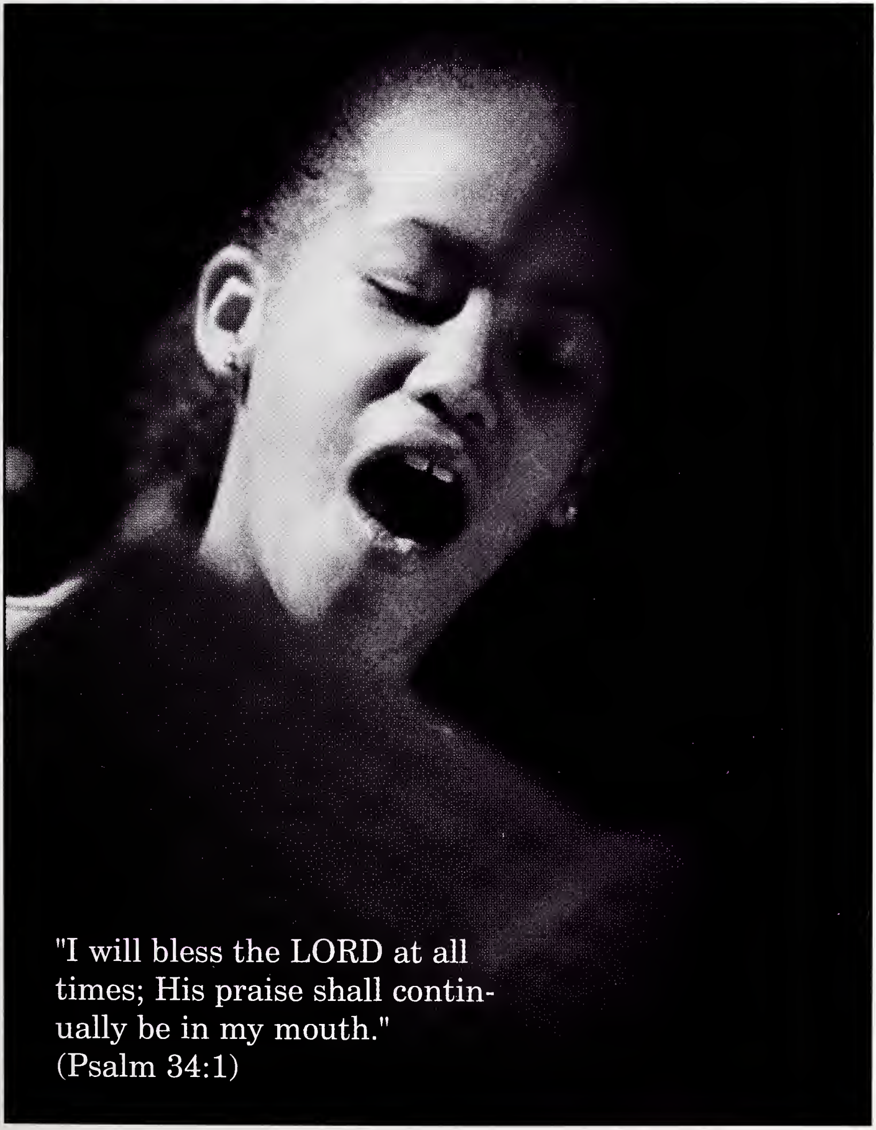

"I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth." (Psalm 34:1)

CAROLINA
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Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
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Spiritual Truths and Human Nature

Dennis Conner

I've always heard it said, and have preached, that the Christian faith runs counter to our basic human nature. Two recent incidents confirmed that truth to me and reminded me how resistant we are to the fundamental realities of the Christian experience. In the context of the two incidents I am about to share with you, I am thinking about the realities of grace and surrender.

> "Our human nature insists that we be the masters of our own destinies..."

In the first incident, the Yadkinville church had a yard "sale." Well, actually, it was a storage room giveaway. We didn't really sell anything. We have a large storage room as part of our picnic shelter that had become quite cluttered over the past few years. Our purpose was two-fold: clean out the storage room and reach out to the community. The date was set and the "yard sale" publicized.

As people came up we told them, "*Everything is free! Take as much home as you can. We want you to have it.*" Even though the sign out front said "Everything free," people either didn't read it or thought there was some kind of catch. People would find things they wanted and then they would try to pay for them. We would tell them again, "*We don't want any money. It's free, really!*" "*Are you sure?*" "*Yes, we're sure.*" Some would finally get the picture and just take their stuff to their cars, not believing their good fortune. Some still insisted paying us, even though we insisted we didn't want their money.

All morning long I marveled at how difficult it was for people to accept grace. Virtually everyone who visited us that day wanted to pay for their stuff. Many were noticeably uncomfortable. And I thought to myself, "*That's pretty much the way people are about God's grace.*" Even though we may embrace the notion of grace intellectually, there seems to be something in our nature that insists on paying for it. In the best American tradition, we insist on pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We devise theologies that turn our works and obedience into little more than bootstrap salvation. We are not comfortable if we are not paying for it. To be sure, there are those who cheapen grace by accepting it with an "easy believism" that excludes authentic discipleship. Still, the greater problem, in my experience with people, is the impulse to try to earn our salvation.

The second incident was the occasion of a conversation with a Christian friend my wife and I had not seen in a long time. He asked about Terre's health and expressed gladness at the good news of her remission from cancer. In a well-meaning attempt at encouragement and admiration he said, "*You've really fought hard against this thing, haven't you?*" To which Terre replied, "*No, I haven't fought at all.*" Obviously taken aback at her reply, he felt compelled to correct her, "*Terre, surely you fought!*" "*No,*" she said, "*I didn't.*" I jumped in to rescue our friend, who was drowning in his incredulity and confusion. I explained, "*From the beginning Terre's attitude was one of surrender to the will of God. Live or die, she was willing to accept God's will.*" This friend was not the first to stumble at my wife's decision to surrender rather than fight. That same conversation has been conducted on numerous occasions. Conventional wisdom tells us, "*You fight this thing with all you've got. If you go down, you go down fighting to the end!*" It is not my intent to take issue with those who feel they must fight cancer or any other serious illness. Rather, it is my intent to find the spiritual lesson in the conversation with our friend and to point out that our natural inclinations often fail to grasp the paradoxical nature of the Christian faith. When threatened by the hard issues of life, everything in our nature screams out, "*Fight! Fight for your survival! Fight for your rights!*" But faith says, "*If you want to win, you first have to surrender.*"

In the recent box office hit *Bruce Almighty*, the central character, Bruce (who has complained to God about how He's doing His job) is endowed with the Almighty's own divine powers. He's allowed to be God for a while. Bruce spends the next few days using the power to benefit himself. Finally, when his self-will has left his life broken and empty, Bruce finds himself kneeling in the middle of a highway in a driving rain calling out to God, "*I can't do this anymore, God. I surrender completely to your will!*" It is only then, in complete surrender, that Bruce is able to experience freedom and blessing.

That's pretty much the way it is with us. We insist on living our lives on our own terms. Even in our relationship with God we find ourselves too often trying to dictate the terms of the relationship in a useless attempt to maintain control over our

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lives. And the result? Things still spin out of control. It is only in surrender to the will of God — in the prayer "*Not my will but Yours be done*" — that we find true victory and blessing.

Grace and surrender. There is a common thread running through the fabric of both: complete dependence upon God. And that dependence is what runs so counter to our human nature. Our human nature insists that we be the masters of our own destinies, but grace and surrender compel us to admit the failure of self-mastery. So if you really want to live, give up and accept God's grace.

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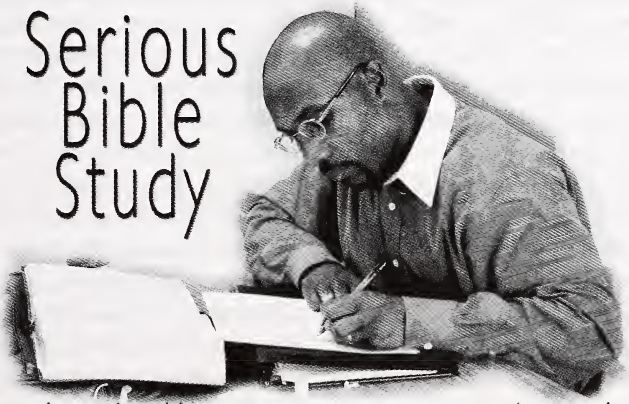
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The Glory of the Mundane

Ron Newberry

How many opportunities to do something great for God do you suppose we have passed up because we assume that unless something is spectacular it doesn't count? How often do we assume that the mundane, the tedious, the difficult things that need to be done should be done by someone with less talent than we have while we await the dramatic occasion to make a real impact? As I reflect on those questions, Matthew 25:14-46 comes to mind. The early part of that periscope contains the parable of the talents. The latter part discusses the judgment scene in which we are reminded that the mundane, tedious things that are often out of the lime light may be the very things that we do that serve God the most.

God's Little Devotional Book for Leaders tells a story of a young man who many years ago worked in a labor intensive job for a railroad company. When his superiors offered him an opportunity to work in the shipping department for a few days he jumped at the chance.

During his short stint as a shipping clerk his superintendent asked him for some critical data and demanded that the facts and figures be on his desk when he returned in three days. Since this was a time before computers, he had to personally and laboriously collect the data one piece at a time from the various reports available to him. He didn't know anything about bookkeeping, but he knew something about hard work. For three days and nights, going without sleep, he slowly but surely pulled the statistics together and the report was ready when the superintendent returned.

The young man received accolades from his boss. He had proven to be too valuable to his superintendent to send him back to the railroad as a section hand. He was given a permanent position in the shipping department. Over the next several years he received promotions as rewards for his excellent work. His thoroughness and trustworthiness proved to be extremely helpful to the company. He eventually became vice-president of the Ralston Purina Company in St. Louis, Missouri.

The point of the story is easy to understand. When we give each and every task our best effort, no matter how mundane, we will be rewarded not only for completing the task, but also for the attitude with which we complete it.

J. C. Penney said, "*Give me a stock clerk with a goal and I'll show you a man who will make history; show me a man without a goal and I'll show you a stock clerk.*"

Listen to how Scripture addresses this concern. "*Lazy hands*

Count Your Blessings

Kent Massey

thanksgiving is just around the corner. It's time to "*Count your blessings, name them one by one...*"

If you woke up this morning with more health than illnesses, you're more blessed than the million people who won't survive this week.

If you own inspirational books, you're abundantly blessed. One-third of the world doesn't even have access to one.

If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation, you're more ahead of 500 million people around the world.

If you attend a church meeting without fear of harassment, arrest, torture, or death, you're more blessed than almost three billion people in the world.

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof over your head, and a place to sleep, you're richer than 75% of this world. If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish someplace, you're among the 8% of the world's healthy.

If your parents are still alive and still married, you're very rare, even in the United States.

If you hold your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful, you're blessed because although the majority can, most do not.

If you can hold someone's hand, hug them, or even just touch them on the shoulder, you're blessed because

(continued on page 12)

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make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth," (Proverbs 10:4). "*His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness,'*" (Matthew 25:21). "*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well,*" (Matthew 6:33). "*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might,*" (Ecclesiastes 9:10a). "*If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen,*" (1 Peter 4:11b).

Perhaps the next time we hesitate to do what needs to be done because it doesn't seem too important, we will tackle the task anyway. What we accomplish may not be nearly as important as the attitude with which we accomplish it.

Spiritual Warfare (Part 2)

Paul Jarrett

In Part One we noted how Paul's approach to the subject of spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:10-17 differs from his approach to this topic in other texts. In our text for this study the focus is on dealing with external forces we will encounter in this spiritual conflict. In other texts, Paul's focus is on the internal struggle that we all experience as we struggle with our fleshly nature. I chose to spend considerable time looking at what Paul said about spiritual warfare in other texts because I believe an appreciation for the basic nature of this conflict holds the key to a proper exegesis of Ephesians 6:10-17.

Our Struggle is Not Against Flesh and Blood

While we are involved in a spiritual warfare because we are creatures of flesh, it is important for us to realize that our struggle is "*not against flesh and blood.*" Rather, our struggle is with "*the spiritual forces of wickedness*" which seek to capitalize on our fleshly nature to take control of our lives. The leader of these forces of wickedness is Satan, and we are not left "*ignorant of his schemes*" (2 Corinthians 2:11). Let me share with you just two examples of how Satan seeks to take advantage of our fleshly nature to bring us under his control. First, we can observe his tactics in connection with the original sin as recorded in Genesis 3:1-6. In this account we see all three forms of temptation described in I John 2:15 at work. The *lust of the flesh* is seen in the fact that "*the tree was good for food.*" The *lust of the eye* is seen in the fact that the fruit was "*a delight for the eyes.*" The temptation is complete when Satan appeals to the *pride of life* by telling Eve, "*You will be like God.*" Satan's downfall was pride, and the conceit that tells us we can control our own lives continues to be his principle snare in bringing men and women into captivity to sin (see 1 Timothy 2:6; 2 Corinthians 10:12; Jeremiah 10:23).

Second, we see Satan employing a different approach in his testing of Job as described in Job 1:6-2:10. Where he enticed Eve with promises of pleasure, he seeks to turn Job against God by means of loss and pain. He begins by telling God that Job is only serving him because of the benefits he has received. When Job remains faithful after losing all his possessions and children, Satan tells God he will surely reject Him when his own flesh is racked with pain. While Job remained faithful, we have all witnessed occasions when Satan's tactics worked. We have seen someone turn away from God because of some problem they have experienced in the flesh.

(continued on page 10)

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(*Spiritual Warfare* continued)

Our Common Adversary

While it is important for us to be aware of Satan's tactics in order to defeat him in our personal battle with sin, it is also important for us to realize that he employs these same tactics in the lives of every person with whom we come in contact. It is our failure to recognize this fact which has led to many souls being victimized by what the military describes as "friendly fire." If we are going to refrain from doing harm to one another, we must stay focused on our common adversary (see 1 Peter 5:8). We must know how to deal with those who have been taken captive by him. A failure to deal with Satan's captives in a proper manner may lead to us also being captured.

A Spirit of Gentleness

The apostle Paul identified the first requirement for dealing with those who have been captured by Satan to be a spirit of gentleness when he wrote, "*The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will*" (1 Timothy 5:24-26). We need to mirror the love of Christ for sinners in reaching out to them in a spirit of gentleness.

However, the incentive for being gentle in our treatment of those held captive by the devil involves more than just a concern for their plight. We also are encouraged to deal gently with others so that we too "*will not be tempted*" (Galatians 6:1). We noted earlier that pride is a major tool employed by Satan to bring us into captivity to sin. We must resist the temptation to be proud in our estimation of our own righteousness in comparison with others. We must not forget that "*God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble*" (James 4:6). In our dealings with others, we need to realize that "*knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies*" (1 Corinthians 8:1ff). We must resist the temptation to trust in our own righteousness (see Luke 18:9-14). This exhortation found in 1 Peter 5:6-9 shows the importance of humility in dealing with our common enemy: "*Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God... be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour...*"

Overcome Evil With Good

If the spiritual warfare in which we are involved is between good and evil (and it is), we must be sure that we are on the side of good. We cannot overcome evil with evil. When we respond to evil with evil we simply contribute to the victory of evil in the world. The apostle Paul put it like this, "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*" (Romans 12:21). The strong Christian is the one who makes it his aim to "*please his neighbor for his good, for his edification*" (Romans 15:1-2). The strong Christian does not spend his/her time passing judgment on others, but rather determines "*not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way*" (Romans 14:14).

Finally

Our text for this study begins with the word "*Finally.*" This is Paul's way of signifying that what he is about to say is a summation of what he has been talking about. While he may be referring to all that he has written in this epistle, I believe he is especially wanting us to make application to what has been said starting in Ephesians 4:17. I say that because this verse appears to mark the beginning of his practical application of the doctrinal foundation he has set forth in the first half of this epistle. Starting in 4:17 he writes about how we are to walk in accordance with the newness of life to which we have been called in Christ (4:17-24). He writes about our conduct in our dealings with our fellow Christians (4:25-32); in our personal life as we live in the world (5:1-20); in our families as husbands and wives (5:21-33) and as parents and children (6:1-4); and in what today would be described as employer-employee relationships (6:5-9).

In his summation, Paul is saying that in all these relationships we are to "*be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.*" We are to "*put on the full armor of God, so that [we] will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood...*" (Emphasis is mine). Being aware of the true identity of our enemy is critical to our ability to emerge victorious in the spiritual warfare in which we find ourselves engaged. A failure to appreciate this will cause us to do harm to those who are already held captive by the devil, and may also lead to our own capture.

Know Your Enemy

There are going to be times when, "*a man's enemies will be those of his own household*" (Matthew 10:36). Job's wife told him to "*curse God and die*" (Job 2:9). There will be times when we may be persecuted by someone who thinks that "*he is offering service to God*" (John 16:2). The apostle Paul once thought he "*had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth*" (Acts 26:9). We are going to encounter those who are "*held captive by him [the devil] to do his will*" (1 Timothy 2:26). It is one of

(continued on next page)

(*Count Your Blessings* continued) you can offer God's healing touch through your caring.

If you prayed yesterday and today, you're in the minority because you believe in God's willingness to hear and answer prayer.

If you can read this message, you're more blessed than over two billion people in the world who cannot read anything at all.

"*Count your blessings, name them one by one…*" If we truly did what the song suggests we would be singing from now to next Thanksgiving with thanks for family, friends, food, clothing, cars, home, health, freedom and opportunity. But in order to count blessings, we have to have them. That is what makes Paul's encouragement in Ephesians so special when he challenges us to give thanks for nothing. In fact, Paul shows us the example of his own thanksgiving. He doesn't give thanks for Game Boys, new clothes or PCs. His thanksgiving is about things that cannot be touched, held, owned or bought. His blessings cannot be patted, purchased or possessed.

"*For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his might strength,*" (Ephesians 1:15-19).

(continued on page 16)

(*Spiritual Warfare* continued) his favorite schemes.

How are we going to respond when this happens? Are we going to recognize the true identity of our enemy, or are we going to employ "friendly fire" to destroy one another? Are we going to deal gently with one another, or are we going to sin against one another in a spirit of arrogance? Are we going to overcome evil with good, or are we going to be overcome by evil ourselves? Are we going to put on the armor of God to fight against our common foe, or are we going to allow Satan to disguise himself as an "*angel of light*" (see 2 Corinthians 11: 14-15) and deceive us into going to war with one another?

Real Men: Fishing & Tea Parties

Russ Jurek

We have come to the last in this series of five articles on real men and their Families. Each of the 5 articles has been taken from material on our new seminar on men's leadership in the home. I pray that they will help us all become stronger leaders for God in our families.

On the long drive from North Augusta to Nashville, I had a lot of time to think. We were taking our son Kyle to begin his First year as a Bible major at Lipscomb University. My wife Cindy, rode with Kyle in his car and I followed in our Explorer, loaded down with all the necessities for survival in college. There was a microwave, refrigerator, carpet, TV, etc., and there were even a few books. Anyway, with all this time on my hands, I found myself thinking about this new stage in his life and in mine and Cindy's. I though about the past 18 years of my son's life and how quickly they have gone. I thought of all the good, bad and ugly times we've had through those years of raising him to this point. I thought of the sleepless nights of infancy, stepping on small toys in the dark during those toddler years. I thought of baseball games and summer camp, homework battles and Jr. High School years. It wasn't until I thought of fishing that I found myself getting teary eyed.

You see, Kyle and I have been fishing together since he was about 4 years old. I remembered back when I bought an old john boat for $50.00. I put his name on the registration as co-owner and you would have thought I bought him a 50' yacht. We have laughed many times at how silly we must have looked in those days as we drove to a fishing hole with our 14' john boat tied on top of our little Nissan station wagon. It didn't matter to us, we were going fishing. Oh the fishing stories we can tell, and not all of them are lies either! Occasionally, my wife would taunt us saying, "*I don't know why you waste your time going fishing, you guys never catch anything.*" *We would just smile and say something like, "you're missing the point, we just enjoy being out there together. If we catch fish, that's icing on the cake.*"

Yeah, as I drove toward Nashville, the thing that got to me most was how much I'm gonna miss our spur of the moment fishing trips with our "first, most and biggest fish" personal tournaments. What helped me dry the tears most was thinking about how strong our relationship is and how much we both look forward to fishing together "whenever" we can in the future.

By the way, with my daughter, we had tea parties when she was little (thus the title of this article).

(continued on next page)

The Lord of the Altar

Dennis Lynn

When I was growing up, we never talked much about altars. I understood why we didn't — about the only burnt offerings I ever experienced were when my marshmallows or hot dogs got too close to the campfire at Little Blue Bible Camp. But I wonder, perhaps, if we have missed out on some wonderfully worshipful imagery by missing the message that an altar conveys.

The notion of an altar certainly speaks to themes of the Lord's Supper, themes like worship, sacrifice and death. Jesus is the lamb led to the slaughter. Every Lord's Day, we gather together, not to worship the altar, but to worship the Lord of the altar. At the altar of a wooden table we remember the sacrifice of the Savior who died on the altar of a wooden cross. The lumber of the cross and the lumber of the table is not what's important; the love at the cross and the table is what's important. The sacrifice and symbolism of the cross and the table are what make them both sacred structures.

When the apostle Paul exhorts us to "examine" ourselves before we eat the bread and drink the cup, he is extending an altar call. The most convincing proclamation of the Lord's death until He comes is a life that climbs up on the altar every single day, willingly dying to self and selfishness.

"Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship," (Romans 12:1).
Dennis Lynn is president of Cascade in Portland, Oregon. He can be contacted at 9101 E. Burnside, Portland, OR 97216.

(*Real Men* continued)
Those tea parties turned into lunch dates together and even out own special restaurant we shared. When she comes home for a visit, we try to make the time to go to our place to have lunch together. Fishing and Tea parties is what I call the special things you do with your children to build a relationship for a lifetime. Whatever the activity, the specialness you build into it will give each of you something to continue to share when they are grown. Fishing and tea parties create a life time of treasured moments together!

Spectator Sport?

Mark Hudson

I'll admit it. I am not the greatest sports fan in the world. My Little League baseball career was short and very unimpressive. When the coach needed a ninth body I was sent to right field and told to lie down in front of the ball. During college I played interclub volleyball. "D" team. "D" teams were the fourth echelon of competition. It was so bad we had trouble completing the volley for serve. We would have flipped a coin, but nobody on the team could toss a coin and catch it. We had fun chasing the ball. Even today I have cable, but I can't tell you the channel for ESPN. Although I'm not very sports-minded, I do have a few opinions. I want the Dallas Cowboys to win the Super Bowl. It matters not who's playing; I'm rooting for the Cowboys. I actually enjoy the Super Bowl, especially the commercials. I also morph into a sports fan during the Olympics. Being a spectator watching the best athletes in the world makes sense. It's fun. On the other hand, I will never understand how a "sport's fan" can tie up an afternoon watching someone else fish on TV. Fishing was never meant to be a spectator's sport.

> "Mutual encouragement is one Biblical goal of worship."

Sometimes we think of worship as a spectator's sport where the congregation watches a select few participate in worship. Perhaps it's our architecture. Our one-sided arena has the home team fans lined up to watch a few performers. Perhaps it's a carry-over of the Old Testament or denominational practice of the priests or "clergy" performing religious ritual in behalf of "laity". Perhaps it's our dominant culture that says, "entertain me." We've grown so accustomed to watching others perform. Imagination, recreation and participation have been relegated to stadium seating.

God intended for worship to be extremely personal and participatory. Although we can gather for worship as a group, we must not assemble as spectators. For example, singing connects each individual's heart, mind and body. I am changed by my participation. Singing also connects me to the people gathered with me. I can gather with a group of strangers in a theater to watch a movie. Individually we can be touched, moved, or challenged. For a moment we may bond, but after the movie we go our separate ways and lead our separate lives. Not so with worship! Mutual encouragement is one Biblical goal of worship.

I pray you will think of worship as something in which you participate rather something you observe.

Sole Man

Kent Massey

I recently said "good-bye" to an old friend. We had traveled many years together (15 to be exact). The places we had been and the things we had seen would fill volumes. We fit together so well and had grown extremely comfortable through the years. Ours was a custom fitted relationship. My old friend wasn't looking too good one day, so we went to see the specialist, who declared there was nothing more that could be done for my friend. He was beyond help. And now, I miss my old friend.

Before you get teary eyed and send me a sympathy card, let me tell you who my friend was. It was an old pair of Johnson-Murphy black oxford dress shoes. The were the most comfortable shoes I had ever worn and truly felt like a pair of old broken in bedroom slippers. I'm trying to get used to a new pair and every time I wear them it reminds me how much I miss the feel of the old ones.

My daddy used to tell me that you could tell much about a man by the condition he kept his shoes in. But shoes also tell us much about the type of person wearing them. Cowboy boots, wing tips, Italian loafers, spiked heels, flats, mules, slings — shoes reveal much about

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(*Count Your Blessings* continued)

One of my favorite books is Antoine de Saint-Exupery's The Little Prince. In it, the fox character is saying farewell to the little prince and as he leaves he says, "*And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.*" "*What is essential is invisible to the eye,*" the little prince repeats, so that he will remember it.

The fox took his philosophy directly from Paul who said, "*We loot not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal,*" (2 Corinthians 4:18). It is the unseen that is eternal and the essential is invisible to the eyes.

This perspective of Thanksgiving runs counter to conventional wisdom. It is not about the material, concrete and temporary things of this world. It is about those things which are unseen, invisible and eternal. This is Paul's thanksgiving perspective.

In the prayer for the Ephesians,

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the people who wear them.

We often use expressions about shoes that describe a person's plight. We doubtfully say, "*He'll never fill his daddy's shoes.*" Or we brag, "*She's going to follow in my shoes...*" We affirm, "*If the shoe fits, wear it.*"

Peoples' shoes are even mentioned many places in Scripture. Moses takes his shoes off as he stands on holy ground (Exodus 3). The children of Israel go through the wilderness for 40 years and their shoes never wear out (Deuteronomy 29). Boaz seals his deal for Ruth by taking off his sandal (Ruth 4). Amos complains of the selfishness of the people in selling the poor a pair of shoes (Amos 2). And the armor of God includes having our shoes filled with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace (Ephesians 6).

Shoes are more than just a fashion statement. Just ask the construction guy who wears those clunky, steel toed brogans, or the dainty ballerina and her uncomfortable toe shoes. Shoes make it possible for us to step boldly and briskly into the world as we go about our business. Properly shod we can go across just about any surface in confidence. Where are your shoes taking you?

Matthew recounts the beginning of the preaching ministry of Jesus in chapter 4 of his gospel. "*When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali, to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: 'Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.' From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.' As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John...Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people,*" (Matthew 4:12-23).

This text doesn't tell us anything about the types of shoes worn by Jesus and the first disciples. But it tells much about what they used their shoes for, and what path their shoes could take them safely down. In verses 12-17, Matthew tells us that Jesus went on a specific journey for a specific purpose. Jesus Christ was going on a mission to fulfill a centuries old prophecy from Isaiah. Jesus knew exactly where he must go and where his shoes should travel.

Later in the story when Peter, James and John heard Jesus call them out, their response was not slow or hesitant, not cautious or careful. Instead they reacted like racers who hear the crack of the starter's pistol. They immediately ran to Jesus. Their fisherman's sandals were transformed into track shoes. They ran to Jesus so they could become fishers of men.

Jesus doesn't wait until they get off work for the day, with their shoes kicked off, awaiting supper, to call them. He called them right in the middle of their busy, workday world. Just like he calls us.

The shoes they began to wear that day were the shoes of Jesus. They left families and homes, rearranged their entire lifestyle, and followed him to practice and ply their new calling.

It wasn't long before Jesus and the disciples were leaving their shoeprints all over Galilee. They were busy in the synagogues proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and restoring the sick. Jesus called the disciples to follow him — to wear the same shoes. To do what he was doing to those who needed it the most. To lead people to restoration in Jesus Christ. To show people the place of true freedom — Jesus. To inspire people to do the right thing before it was too late.

Jesus calls us to the same work he did. Our shoes become his shoes, and his shoes become our shoes. Jesus no longer wears sandals. Since the day he ascended to the cross, he has no other shoes but ours. And just like the first disciples, Jesus calls us to radical obedience. The church is called to be his body to a sin sick and hurting world. It is not enough to talk about walking in his steps. Maybe the larger calling is that we are to walk in his shoes.

If the shoe fits, wear it. The shoes Jesus offers — his shoes, your shoes — will always fit because they are custom made to our personal and individual talents, strengths and personalities. Each of us may wear the shoes differently, but we will all wear them for the same reason: to glorify the Father.

Does the shoe Jesus give you fit? If so, wear it! You may be surprised where you will take them and where they will take you.

Kent Massey can be contacted at 4900 Providence Rd., Charlotte, NC 28226.

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Jesus: Man of Sorrows, Prince of Peace

Mikal Frazier

My goal that day was to locate my friend and reassure her of my connection to her. I was aware of secret sin in her life. She knew I knew. I also knew a tragedy had hit the life of one of her children. I hugged her, told her I loved her and asked how she was. She responded, "*I'm great, always.*"

This response set me to thinking. Are we great? Can we be great — always?

There certainly did seem to be many examples of Christians and followers of Christ in sorrow. Even Jesus is referred to as "*A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*" (Isaiah 53:3)

In his commentary Matthew Henry writes about this verse from Isaiah: "*It was not only his last scene that was tragical, but his whole life was so; not only mean, but miserable — one continued chain of labour, sorrow, and consuming pain.*"

In John 11 we see where "*Jesus wept*" and he "*groaned within himself*" as he dealt with the death of Lazarus and the grieving family. In Matthew 23:37 Jesus grieved over the rejection of Jerusalem. In the garden He prayed in agony and "*His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*" (Luke 22:43)

Yes, Jesus, our Prince of Peace was also a man who knew great sorrow. In Luke 22 when he is described as being in agony, I do not believe he would have responded to someone, "*Oh, I'm great, always.*"

I certainly have my days when I am burdened. I have been so very burdened on occasion that I was led to a time of fasting and prayer.What is the harm of not addressing the pain we feel, of not sharing it with others?

When we cannot acknowledge our own pain, others will not want to come to us if we take on the façade of no understanding of such pain. We are fooling no one but ourselves. We teach our children to live in denial, which can lead to grave consequences in their relationships. It is not honest. It prevents us from truly connecting with others. Intimacy is shared privacy, joy and sorrow. If I cannot share my pain, I lose out on one of God's greatest blessings, the encouragement of my brethren.

Perhaps most tragically, if we deny our feelings, then we will not be struck with Godly sorrow that brings us to repentance. (2 Corinthians 7:10)

We must acknowledge our God-given feelings of joy and sorrow. In John 16:20 Jesus says, "*Most assuredly I say to you that you will weep and lament... but your sorrow will be turned into joy.*" Jesus is speaking of his death and resurrection. Yet he continues in verse 33, "*In the world you will have tribulation;*

Doubts

Jerry Senn

Alister McGrath writes, "*Doubt is natural within faith. It comes because of our human weakness and frailty...Unbelief is the decision to live your life as if there is no God. It is a deliberate decision to reject Jesus Christ and all that he stands for. But doubt is something quite different. Doubt arises within the context of faith. It is a wishful longing to be sure of the things in which we trust. But it is not and need not be a problem.*"

I was glad to read that because it has always bothered me when doubts have arisen in my soul.

Abraham is called the father of all who believe. His faith is noted because of the heights to which he ascended as an obedient follower of God. Yet, he often doubted how God's amazing promises would come to pass (Genesis 15:8).

James did say believers should not be doubters (James 1:6-8), but as Peter David's remarks, "*James is not trying to encourage believers to stuff their doubts deep within and to drum up an emotional feeling of certainty, but to commit themselves... Faith remains resting in God... and holds*

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but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

In Job 14:1 Job tells us "*Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble.*" Christian author Larry Crabb reminds us in his book *Inside Out*, "*An aching soul is evidence not of neurosis or spiritual immaturity, but of realism.*" We live in a world where there is tribulation, where we war "*against the rulers of the darkness of this age ... and wickedness in the heavenly places.*" (Ephesians 6:12) We will not always feel great.

Even in our trials though, we can choose peace. Jesus said, "*Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.*" (John 14:27)

In times of struggle, God is our refuge. In Deuteronomy 33:27 Moses writes, "*The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.*"

Mikal Frazier is a regular contributor to All About Families, an online e-magazine. She can be contacted at . This article appeared in the October 8, 2003 issue of All About Families and is used with permission. You can check out this excellent resource at allaboutfamilies.org.

Goodbye, Ordinary!

Peter Rode

In the movie *Spiderman* Peter Parker (aka Spiderman) develops incredible powers and abilities as a result of a radio active spider bite and realizes he can't use the powers for himself. He has to use them to make a difference and says, "*For me, living an ordinary life is not an option anymore.*" Because of these extraordinary powers he can no longer settle for the ordinary.

When I heard those words in the movie, my thoughts immediately turned to us Christians. We have been given something incredibly special and powerful. It is the gift of God. In reality, it is God — God living in us. Peter told the crowd who listened to his message on Pentecost to "*repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,*" (Acts 2:37-38). That means that each of us who has responded to the call of God by being united with Christ in baptism has received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And that means we have the most powerful force in the universe residing within us.

When Jesus was raised from the dead, He conquered death — the one thing that had stopped every human in his tracks, except One. Jesus was raised by the power of God through the Spirit (Romans 1:4; 1 Peter 3:18). That same Spirit is who we have indwelling us right now!

So what is supposed to be the practical result of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus? The only answer I can think of is that we have t stop living for ourselves, stop settling for small and ordinary, and start living a life worthy of Jesus' sacrifice. We need to start living a

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(*Doubts* continued)

on through testing…A doubter is one who lives in inner conflict between trust and distrust of God."

George McDonald said, "*Doubt is the hammer that breaks the window clouded with human fancies and lets in the pure light.*" We never grow until we doubt.

So, let us have the courage to test our honest doubts, but let us never give up our pursuit of truth simply because we do not understand how God works.

Jerry Senn can be contacted at 1975 Haywood Rd., Hendersonville, NC 28791, or by e-mail at hcoc@brinet.com.

life worthy of the resurrection power we have available to us. That's what Paul means in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 when he writes, "*Christ's love compels us...He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again.*" How can anyone in whom this death-conquering Christ lives ever settle for ordinary again? Paul expressed his lifelong passion this way: "*I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection...*" (Philippians 3:10). Exploring, unleashing, experiencing the awesome power of the Jesus who lives in you!

Maybe you're like so many believers who say, "*There's got to be something more than this.*" It's like saying, "*I want to make a greater difference with the rest of my life than what I've made until now.*" I believe it's God who's making you restless. He wants you to realize the power you have through the Spirit. He wants you to give yourself to a mission far larger than your little kingdom, your little comfort zone.

You don't have to settle for mediocrity any longer. You've been settling for a life that's too small; that's only as big as you can make it. I suggest you need to get out of the comfortable life you've created for yourself and allow God to fill you. Commit to living for Him who died for you and rose again and say, "*For me, living an ordinary life is just not an option anymore. From now on, I'm going to live for Christ!*"

Then stand back and see what happens!

(*Count Your Blessings* continued)

Paul first gave thanks for faith and love. "*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints...*" Paul knew that the sign of true success is not a six-figure salary, a luxury SUV or a stellar portfolio. Instead, success is being a person who trust completely in the sufficiency of Christ and lives a life motivated by grace.

Second, Paul gave thanks for a spirit of wisdom and revelation. These are the by-products of our ever growing and ever deepening relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This spirit opens our eyes to what God has in store for us and leads us to trust his guidance. The more we trust and he is proven to be faithful, the more we will come to realize the value and richness of a life in communion with God. It is this spirit of

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What If...

This article originally appeared in the August, 1977 issue of Carolina Christian

Howard Winters

Henry Ward Beecher, a man we would not ordinarily quote with relish, has one of his characters in Norwood (Hiram Beers) to make an acute observation about Judge Bacon as he approaches an early New England assembly. "*There comes Judge Bacon, white and ugly,' said the critical Hiram. 'I wonder what he comes to meetin' for. Lord knows he needs it, sly, slippery old sinner! Face's as white as a lily; his heart's as black as a chimney flue afore it's cleaned. He'll get his flue burned out if he don't repent, that's certain. He don't believe the Bible. They say he don't believe in God. Wal, I guess it's pretty even between 'em. Shouldn't wonder if God didn't believe in him neither.*'"

This statement brought an immediate question: what if God were reciprocal in all our actions? What if He did to and for us precisely what we do to and for Him?

What if God did deny the existence of man, the creature, when man denies the existence of God, the Creator? What would man be if God did not believe in him?

What if God loved us only to the degree that we love Him? God first loved us. "*But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,*" (Romans 5:8). The love of God is a strong incentive for us to love him in return (1 John 4:19). What if God cared about us and our welfare just as we care about him and his cause? What if God used all the excuses for not providing for us that we use for not serving him?

What if God refused to hear us when we refuse to hear him?

What if God gave his blessings (such as sunshine, rain, the air we breathe) as sparingly as man gives to God (his talents, his time and his money)? God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:6-7), and a cheerful giver loves God. But what if it were the other way around? What if God did not love the stingy and the selfish because the stingy and the selfish obviously do not love God?

What if God forsook man every time man forsakes God?

What if God failed to keep his promises to men as often as men fail to keep their promises to God? "*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,*" (2 Peter 3:9). But men are slack concerning their promises — they often promise and then do not fulfill.

What if God said, "*Sunday is the only day I have for myself. I will therefore sleep late, go play golf, and then take it easy in the*

Working Puzzles

Allen Close

I like to work jigsaw puzzles. If you started one at my house I would soon start spending time trying to find just one more piece of the puzzle.

My grandma in Abilene got me started. When I would go see her in the summer we would stay up late into the night working on a puzzle. We could do the big, hard ones. We always started with the border. If it was an outdoor scene one of us would eventually have to do the sky even though it was usually the most boring part. In any puzzle there are some parts that are easy to put together and there are some other parts that are hard. Some pieces are so obvious because they have something on them that is easy to identify. There are some pieces, however, that are hard to find. Whenever you find one of those pieces you feel like you have done something!

Recently a different kind of puzzle piece fell into place for me. It was a piece of a theological puzzle. For many, many years I have been preaching and teaching about the role of suffering in the Christian life. I believe that the thought that if you follow God, he will lay out a red carpet through your life is a greatly mistaken notion. There are some that teach that any suffering or failure in your life is a sign of spiritual immaturity or a lack of faith. They obviously ignore the lives of most of those we read about in the Bible. There is no way to align this theology with the lives of men like Joseph, Jeremiah, or even Jesus. This part of my theology was strong, but there was still something missing.

As I taught about suffering, I realized that the life I was describing was not very desirable. My understanding led to a belief that the Christian life was a life you just have to get through. Life may be awful

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evening. Man should not expect me to be concerned about him on the Lord's Day."

In short, what if God repaid everyone in kind — belief for belief, love for love, care for care, understanding for understanding, blessing for blessing, faithfulness for faithfulness, promise for promise, service for service?

Thank God! God is more dependable than man. And this very fact should highly motivate us to be more faithful to God.

Dachau

David Kneip

"*Love one another, for love is of God. He who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*" (1 John 4:7-8)

We love these words and sing them often. They are a theme of John's letter — that trust in God exhibits itself in how we treat each other. We love because God Himself is love.

Recently I visited the former Nazi concentration camp in Dachau, Germany. We had been living in Germany for several weeks by this point and had been told by more than one older German how difficult it was for them to always be associated with the Nazis. "*That didn't have anything to do with us,*" they would say. "*That was our parents' generation.*"

The atmosphere at Dachau was very different from this sentiment; people there seemed determined to remember the past. You get the feeling that what happened in the past has very much to do with us in the present because, since it happened once, it might happen again.

Our tour began with views of the entrance gate and a bit of the history of the camp. We learned how Dachau was the first concentration camp built and how it became a test loca-

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(*Working Puzzles* continued)
now, but it will be better later. What I taught was true enough in so far as it goes, but something was missing.

I have been reading *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard lately. In his book he keeps referring to the easy yoke. Suddenly, it dawned on me that this was one of the missing pieces for which I had been looking. If Jesus said that his yoke was easy and his burden light, then what right did I have to describe it differently.

In order to put this piece in the puzzle I don't have to remove everything I already know about suffering. The point is that they go together. While the Christian life does produce suffering, it is nothing compared to the suffering produced by the world and its lifestyle. Sometimes it may hurt to do the right thing, but it would hurt far more to suffer for doing the wrong thing.

I have many more pieces missing for which I will continue searching. But is sure feels good when I do find one!

Allen Close can be reached at 101 Ball Park Rd, Lexington, SC 29072, or by e-mail at: allenclose@cnoevil.com.

tion for procedures and techniques to be used at other camps. At the beginning only political opponents of the Nazis were housed there, but as the years went by, more and more people who were considered "undesirable" were moved in — Christian leaders who encouraged their churches to oppose the Nazis, Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and even Jehovah's Witnesses.

After watching a film describing the horrors of the camp, we moved on to the punishment cells, the barracks where by war's end 2,000 people were living in buildings designed for 150, and finally the crematoriums and the gas chamber. The gas chamber at Dachau was never "officially" used to kill lots of people, but we know from prisoners who survived that it was "ready to go," meaning it had probably been tested on smaller groups. To stand in rooms designed for people killing other people and then for burning their bodies like trash to be disposed of made us all very quiet.

The Germans have done a very good job of preserving the camp as it was. They have helped to overcome the past by keeping it in their memory — many visitors are German adults or children on field trips. Large sculptures and inscriptions constantly serve as reminders of the victims and charges never to let such a thing happen again.

Fortunately, we ended our visit with the three memorial chapels on the grounds — one Jewish, one Catholic, and one Lutheran. Each one captures a different part of the horror of Dachau and the need to pick up the pieces afterward: honoring the dead, working toward reconciliation between people, and connecting the tragedy with the spilling of Jesus' blood.

In the spilling of his blood — his death on the cross — Jesus both announced God's forgiveness in a way unparalleled theretofore, but also set us an example in the way we are to treat each other. When others wrong us, hurt us, insult us, we forgive them just as Jesus did. Even if it means we lose a little blood, physically or emotionally, we forgive. That doesn't mean we just ignore what they do to us, but what they have done doesn't get in the way of our love for them.

Love is the basis of our forgiveness of others. At first it can be difficult to forgive people when they hurt us, but as we mature and hopefully learn more about God's love for us, we love others more and are more able to forgive them. Our faith is shown by how we treat those around us. "*The one who loves is born of God and knows God.*"

As I stood in the gas chamber at Dachau, this lesson came home to me in new ways. You see, people like me

(continued on page 30)

How Are We Ever Going to Get Along in Heaven?

Paul Jarrett

"*How are we ever going to get along in heaven?*" This is a question we have probably asked at some point as we have observed some church conflict. It believe it's a question that can be answered. I also believe that in answering it we may learn something about how to better get along here on earth.

In order to answer this question we must first consider what is going to be different in heaven from that which is the case here in this life. While you might be able to name several things, let me mention the one difference which I believe is germane to the question. In heaven, unlike here on earth, we will not be creatures of flesh. While we bear the image of the earthy now, in heaven we will bear the image of the heavenly, for flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. It's as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "*And just as we bear the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the*

(*Count Your Blessings* continued)

wisdom that leads us to finally grasp the riches of God's glorious inheritance — an inheritance for more valuable than any property, person or pension.

The last thing Paul prayed for was the Ephesians' experience of the immeasurable greatness of God's power. The same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the heavenly places is also available to us in our everyday walk with God. It doesn't really matter how much power, prestige, personnel or personal inventory we control in the world, because our best and most lasting influence comes through our work as followers of Christ.

As his followers we live in the power of God that sustains all things. We are able to live through incredible hardship and daunting personal obstacles. We are able to share in the love and grace of God and offer hope and peace to a world full of despair. Those are the things that we cannot touch, hold or possess in a material sense. But regardless of what we have or don't have, who we are or who we aren't, what we do or what we don't do, we have equal access to an amazing set of essential, eternal and unseen treasures.

Helen Keller was blind from infancy.

(continued on page 30)

imperishable," (1 Corinthians 15:49-50).

This is significant because sin is directly linked to the temptations we encounter in the flesh. John described sin in terms of fleshly lusts (1 John 2:16). Paul bemoaned the struggle which he waged with his flesh (see Romans 7:14-24). James attributed all sin to being enticed by fleshly lusts (James 1:16). James also strongly implied that God could not be tempted by evil because He is totally Spirit. In fact, Jesus had to become flesh in order to be tempted and overcome sin on our behalf (Hebrew 2:14-18).

When taken together, the two points just noted help to explain why we will be able to get along in heaven. If we will not have bodies of flesh in heaven, then we will not be tempted to commit the sins which contribute to the conflict which makes it difficult for us to get along now. However, I believe there is a little more to our getting along in heaven than just waiting around until God gives us a body which is no longer subject to temptation. Our ability to get along in heaven also depends on the choices we are making now regarding what is going to control our lives. Understanding this choice may help us to get along better now than we often do.

When we were united with Christ in baptism, we signified our intention to crucify the body of sin (Romans 6:6). We made a commitment to crucify the flesh with its passions and desires. As Paul put it to the Galatian Christians, "*And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires,*" (Galatians 5:24, NKJV). Our sights are no longer set on the things of this earth, but on heavenly things (Colossians 3:2). We will never achieve perfection as long as we are in the flesh, but we are expected to discipline our bodies (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Those of us who are in Christ will not be condemned for those sins which we acknowledge to be a result of our fleshly weakness. However, we can be condemned if our hearts indicate that we have not truly made it our aim to seek His will (1 John 3:18-24). God does not expect us to live perfect lives in the flesh, but He demands that our hearts be without blame in holiness (1 Thessalonians 3:12-13).

Our fleshly weaknesses may sometimes make it difficult for us to get along with one another. However, we must guard our hearts even when we may be at odds in the flesh. I find it easier to get along with others when I make a clear distinction between flesh and heart. There are times when those I love do things I don't like, but I love them for their heart's sake and mine.

You Are Treasure

Dennis Conner

We adopted our son, Nelson, when he was two days shy of his tenth birthday. He was a troubled boy who had lived a hard ten years, seeing and experiencing more in those years than any adult should have to in a lifetime. In his previous life he was told things like, "*Jesus won't love you anymore,*" if he wouldn't obey his mother. When he came to us, his notion of God was warped and driven by fear. For months Terre would reassure him, "*What happened to you wasn't your fault. God doesn't hate you. He loves you.*" He loves you so much!" It seemed, though, that the words might as well have fallen on stony ground.

One Saturday morning Nelson snuggled in between us as we prayed together as a family. Burying his head into his mother's shoulder, began to cry. At first, it was imperceptible, but once it became noticeable then Terre tenderly asked, "*Nelson, what's wrong? Why are you crying?*" He whispered something, but that's all it was, barely a whisper. Not understanding, Terre once implored, "*What's wrong son?*" Again

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(*Dachau* continued)
(like us!) were killed there — religious people, people with beliefs who were willing to stand up for them, people who are sometimes "undesirable" in society. At the same time, people like me (like us!) were also among the ones who did the killing — religious people, people who believed they were doing the right thing, people with education, people in the middle class. People like us were both victims and killers.

May God bless us as we seek to love and forgive, and thus help create a world in which the memory of places like Dachau and Jesus' cross prevent such tragedies in the future.

(*Count Your Blessings* continued)
She lived a life of quiet integrity and selfless service to humankind. Her words are particularly poignant as this Thanksgiving season approaches, "*The best and most beautiful things cannot be seen or even touched; they must be felt with the heart.*"

May your heart feel what your hands cannot hold!

Have a wonderful Thanksgiving and may God bless you.

he whispered, but still we couldn't tell what had moved our boy to tears. A third time Terre asked, placing her hand comfortingly on Nelson's head, "*Son, tell us what's wrong? Why are you crying*" Once more he mouthed the words, this time just barely audible, "*Because God loves me.*" In that precious moment a brilliant light penetrated the darkness, a healing truth spoke to his brokenness, and a child understood something that many of us adults struggle to internalize: that we ourselves are treasure to God. It is a truth that can potentially transform the entire dynamic of our relationship with God.

In Matthew 13:44-46 we find two small kingdom stories that reveal a gargantuan truth. The first story (v. 44) is about a farmer who found a treasure buried in a field. Joyfully, and without hesitation, he sacrificed everything he had in order to possess the field. Obviously the newfound treasure was worth the sacrifice.

The second story is about a pearl merchant in search of beautiful pearls. In the course of his search he encountered the pearl of a lifetime. The merchant, like the farmer, sold everything in order to purchase the pearl. Thus, sacrifice for the sake of the one great treasure is the thread uniting both stories.

The popular interpretation of these stories is that the treasure represents the kingdom of God and men, recognizing its surpassing value, should be willing to make any sacrifice necessary to possess it. I would suggest, however, that there are some problems with the popular view and that there is another way of reading the story.

For one thing, in this collection of kingdom stories, Jesus has already said in the parable of the tares in the field that the field represents the world (v. 38). It's reasonable to conclude, then, that the field also represents the world in the other parables. If in fact that is the case, then is Jesus saying that we should make any sacrifice necessary to come into possession of the world in which the treasure lies? That would be doubtful.

The other problem with the popular interpretation is that it sees the plowman and the merchant as representing believers, but in the other Matthew 13 parables that contain a central character, that character has been Jesus (the sower in the parables of vv. 3-9 and vv. 24-30). In fact, Jesus clearly identified himself as the chief character in v. 37, "*He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man...*" In this context, then, it would seem that the character of the plowman and the merchant are actually Jesus, not us.

If this is correct, then Jesus, not the seeker, is the one who finds

(continued on page 32)

I Have Been to the Mountain

Chuck Jones

I've often wondered — of all the things the apostles witnessed while with Jesus, which stood out I their minds more than any other? That's a tough one. They saw people raised from the dead and others healed. They witnessed stormy waters being stilled, and Jesus (and Peter!) walking on the surface of the water. They were then when more than 5,000 people were fed from one young boy's lunch. They watched demons being driven out of people and into pigs. Finally, they saw Jesus ascend into heaven.

Wow! Take your pick. But for three of the apostles, I believe what they saw on a high mountain may have topped all the rest. Here's Mark's account in the ninth chapter of his gospel: "*After six days, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There, he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and*

(continued on next page)

(*You Are Treasure* continued)

the treasure and the great pearl, and Jesus is the one who does the purchasing and the possessing. The treasure and the pearl? Here is the surprise of the parable: they are you and me! Rather than being parables of discipleship, they are in reality parables of grace! They are about God's redemptive purpose in Christ.

It was Jesus who sold all that he had to buy the field and the pearl. It was Jesus who became obedient, even unto death. It was Jesus who became poor so that we might become rich. It was by his precious blood, as a lamb without blemish or spot, that we were redeemed from life in the world. The price paid for the world in sin was the very life of the delight of heaven. And in that mass of lost humanity there would be those (the treasure and the pearl?) who would respond to that costly sacrifice.

In these small parabolic gems Jesus announces our priceless worth in the eyes of the Divine. "*You are everything to me! No matter the mess you have made of your lives, I will pay any price to make you mine.*" Thus, you and I are central to God's kingdom purpose.

Why am I crying? Because God loves me.

Brotherhood News

Mark Hudson

Mocksville, NC... Junior campers during Week One (June 8-14) of Carolina Bible Camp made their theme, "*Broadcasting the Gospel of Christ to the World,*" a reality. During the week Dale Mitchell, Eastern European Mission Regional

(continued on next page)

(*Mountain* continued)
Moses, who were talking with Jesus." Continuing later he writes: "*Then, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.*"

Peter, James and John had a mountaintop experience, literally and figuratively! Jesus, Elijah and Moses — together. And finally, God speaking, acknowledging Jesus as the authority and symbolically taking the others away.

Have you ever been to the mountain? It was nothing at all like the apostles' experience, but I've been there. There have been times of worship when I have felt the presence of God and Jesus near. The singing was right. The sermon touched a chord in everyone and people respond, both in baptism and in recommitting their lives to Christ. Everyone's up. Everyone's happy. We leave with skips in our steps and can't wait to come back.

Then, it happens — the next week comes around and, well, it isn't a mountaintop experience. The mood is more reflective, more subdued. It isn't what we expect and we're disappointed.

It's common. We expect worship to be at that mountaintop level all the time. When it isn't, we feel like the worship has not been acceptable. It's a trap, an obstacle. I'm convinced that God brings us together for his purposes. Each week, something happens in each of us that he wants to happen — if we are sincerely engaged in worship and not coming for ourselves. We have to remember that our emotions are by-products of our worship. Worship is for God and Him only. Sure, it's great to feel good after heartfelt worship. We should. But our feeling should never be the reason nor the motivation for our worship.

So next time you're on the mountain to worship, remember this: God made the mountains, and the valleys, and everything in between. It is all his handiwork, so let us rejoice in it all.

(*Brotherhood News* continued) Coordinator for North and South Carolina, shared with the children about the work of supplying Bibles for Russian homes, public schools and summer camps. A system was worked out through which the children could donate some of their canteen money for buying Russian Bibles. On Friday morning that week it was announced that an anonymous donor would match dollar for dollar the amount raised by the campers. During the Saturday morning closing assembly Canteen Director Freddy Pace presented Mitchell with cash donations totaling $500! With the matching pledge, the children raised a total of $1,000 for the purchase of Russian Bibles. Kirk Sams is the director of Week One.

Aiken, SC... Ten Christians from the Carolinas participated in summer mission trips to Guyana and Suriname, South America. Mark Hudson and Joseph Hudson of Aiken, SC, traveled to Guyana for two weeks in late July. In early August they were joined by Jody Evan of Georgetown, SC; Curtis Gilbert, Union, SC; Craig Hinrichs from Winnsboro, SC; Mike Hinrichs of Rocky Mount, NC; Freddy McCray, Andrews, SC; Billy McVey of Kingstree, SC; Grady Mickle from Chester, SC; and George Whitworth, also of Kingstree. Most of the work was sone along the Corentyne River, which is the border between Guyana and Suriname. Congregations were strengthened in Crabwood Creek, Bishop, Orealla and Apoera, Suriname. Some of this year's mission team helped establish the Apoera congregation two years ago. A building was completed earlier this year. This summer's campaign in Apoera led to the baptism of seven more people. A new congregation was established in the neighboring village of Washabo. Three members of this mission team also worked in the village of Dora, which is on the Demara River south of Georgetown. One of the exciting elements of this mission effort was the inclusion of local Christians in evangelism. A young Guyanese Christian is currently enrolled in a training school and hopes to be a missionary to French Guiana. Christians along the river are being trained and encouraged to carry the gospel further into the interior.

Yadkinville, NC... The Yadkinville Church of Christ will celebrate its 25th anniversary on January, 2004, with a special homecoming service. All former members are being invited back for the special service. For more information, call the church office at (336) 679-8924, or check the church website at www.yadkinvillechurchofchrist.org.

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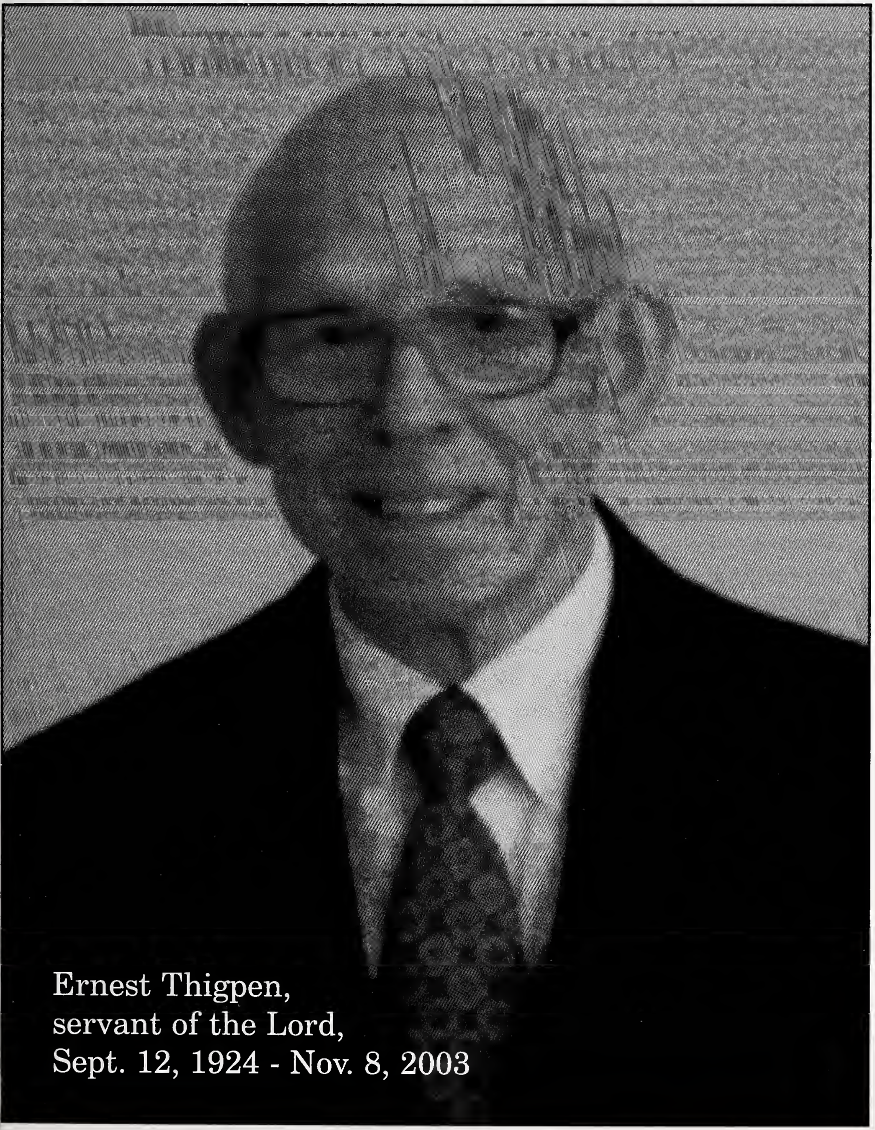

Ernest Thigpen,
servant of the Lord,
Sept. 12, 1924 - Nov. 8, 2003

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Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
Peyton Crump, Design Editor

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Dennis Conner
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Mark Hudson
2006 Whiskey Rd.
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The Gift That Keeps on Giving

Dennis Conner

At this time of year thoughts, money, time and energy are expended on the giving of gifts. Typically, little is spared in thinking of, finding and buying those special gifts for those special someones. Many gifts will be useful and appreciated while others will be put away and forgotten, or put away until they can be given to someone else next Christmas! Then next year, the whole frenzied cycle starts all over again as we try once more to find the ultimate gift for those we care about.

Perhaps some of you remember the old Red Cross public service announcements that encouraged folks to be blood donors. Give blood, "the gift that keeps on giving." That, my friends, is the ticket: a gift that bestows continual benefits, too precious to be valued in dollars and cents. It reminds me of a story we read about in Acts 3:1-10, where Peter and John gave a man the ultimate gift.

> "How confident are we of the power of Christ?"

It was 3:00 in the afternoon and the two apostles were on their way to the temple to pray. The temple was a favorite gathering place for beggars, and there was one beggar the temple worshippers saw every day. He was a man lame from birth. His crippling infirmity had left him entirely dependent upon the pity and generosity of others. Every day he was laid outside the gate known to the citizens and worshippers of Jerusalem as "Beautiful." The gate itself was massive in size and almost pompous in its beauty, being overlaid in magnificent gold. The squalor of the beggar provided a stark contrast to the splendor of the gate.

As Peter and John made their way through the gate, the beggar asked them for money. They stopped and fixed their attention on the man. What did they see at that moment? Yet another waste of human flesh? One more annoyance in life on the way to more important things? Neither. What they saw was an opportunity to be witnesses for the living Christ to the glory of God.

As they fixed their eyes on the man, Peter said to the lame man, "*Look at us.*" The man looked up at them. To look into the eyes of the servant of Christ is to look into

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the eyes of Christ himself. The man looked up, expecting perhaps a bit of money to be dropped into his palm, or his cup, but what he got was completely unexpected. What he got was unimaginable. What he got was the gift that keeps on giving.

"*We don't have any money,*" Peter said, "*but we will share with you what we do have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.*" The man didn't need money; he needed hope. He needed wholeness. He needed a new life. He needed Jesus Christ, the gift who keeps on giving. Suddenly, strength returned to weakened ankles, atrophied muscles regained mass, and hope took wing! The man leaped up off once useless feet and immediately tested his new found freedom, walking, jumping and praising God along the way! He had received the gift of Jesus, the gift of wholeness and newness of life.

Physically crippled people are not the only ones who are handicapped. There are those who are crippled by fear, resentment, covetousness, bitterness, guilt and envy, among other things. This story has a word for such people, and for the church. For people, the message is "*in the name of Jesus Christ...*" In the name of Christ there is power; power for healing and wholeness. For the church, the challenge is to see people as Peter and John saw them and to offer them the wholeness that comes through the power of the name. The power for wholeness and restoration is not in our powers of persuasion and logic, but in Jesus Christ.

This thought leads me to a question. We sometimes sing, "All hail the power of Jesus' name," but how strongly do we believe in the power of that name? How confident are we of the power of Christ? We fret about the lack of growth in our congregations. In reality, though, the crisis is not one of growth, but of confidence. This story asserts that the ascended Jesus was still at work through the life of His newborn church. To make the power and presence of Christ real was the task of Peter and John and the rest of the church. Are we to assume that such is no longer the task of the church? Quite the contrary, the world needs the power and presence of the name more than it ever has! And it needs the church to be serious about this task of sharing.

To go forth in the power of the name means that the church goes into the world with the conviction that Jesus is the answer?he *is* the power. We go to the spiritually and emotionally crippled in the full belief that Christ is able to provide beyond their (and our) expectations. He offers hope when hopes have been exhausted and wholeness when brokenness is all we have ever known. Jesus is ultimate Giver and Gift both.

So, let us lock eyes with the broken and crippled of the world (the most heartless thing we can do is to avert our gaze from theirs), and let us confound their expectations with the grace of the gift who keeps on giving.

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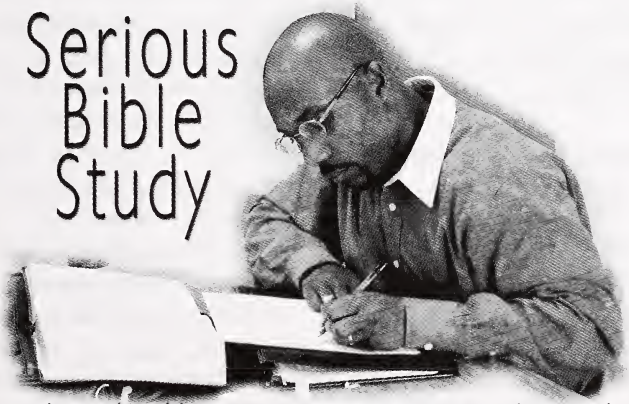

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The Price of Civil War

Ron Newberry

Recently I traveled to northern Maryland in a speaking engagement and had the opportunity to visit southern Pennsylvania. Located one hour northwest of Baltimore, Maryland, is the small Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg. This little village would have remained as obscure and anonymous as tens of thousands of other towns across America if it had not been for three days in July of 1863. Sadly Gettysburg is the site of the largest and bloodiest battle ever waged in our hemisphere. It marked the turning point of the Civil War.

The Battle of Gettysburg opened on July 1, 1863. When it ended two days later with the climactic "Pickett's Charge," a Union victory had successfully turned back the second invasion of the North by General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Names like Little Round Top, the Wheat Field and Devil's Den are places of valor and death on both sides. In just three days, over 51,000 soldiers were killed, wounded or captured. That's a staggering number considering most of those deaths came in close range fighting, many of them in hand-to-hand combat. To put it in perspective, think of a filled football stadium of 50,000 and that a fight broke out in which every one present was killed, wounded or captured in just three days.

> "Equally sad is the fact that all the energy and resources spent in our own civil war are not available to fight the real enemy."

The only positive aspect of the battle at Gettysburg is that it marked the beginning of the end of the Civil War. Two more years of bloody fighting would have to be endured, but Gettysburg was a major turning point in the war. Historians have referred to the Battle of Gettysburg as the "High Water Mark of the Confederacy." It was the last major effort by Lee to take the fighting out of Virginia and into northern states. The solemn Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg contains more than 7,000 gravesites including over 3,500 from the Civil War. One today can see the very spot where President Abraham Lincoln delivered his classic Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863, one hundred and forty years ago this year.

On February 11, 1895, congressional legislation was signed to establish Gettysburg National Military Park as a memorial dedicated to the armies that fought that great three-day battle. Gettysburg National Military Park covers nearly 6,000 acres, with 26 miles of park roads and over 1,400 monuments, markers, and memorials. The monuments and markers are a testimony of courage and bravery. However, they are also silent testimonies to the senseless slaughter given and experienced by both sides. There were countless families decimated and the thousands of lives forever changed. Both sides fought and died for what they believed in, and perhaps even believed was the will of God. What a tragic way to settle our differences.

As I stood at Gettysburg at the base of the monument to the Confederate troops from North Carolina, I thought of another civil war that seems to be raging all around us. It isn't as clear cut as the war between the North and the South. But it too has its generals and lieutenants, its soldiers and its casualties. It's not fought so much over turf and territory as it is over ideas and ideology. No, I am not referring to politics; I'm referring to the church.

Read any number of magazines, papers or bulletins and you hear the grenades exploding that have been lobbed into the ranks of the other side. Bombs are hurled across cities, across states and across the country. In many places it is hand-to-hand combat over worship styles, whether one song leader or four is acceptable, whether or not a woman can ever teach a man, if contemporary songs are valid in worship, etc. Labels like *change agent, liberal, apostate* and *traditionalist, conservative* and *Pharisee* are used to vilify the leaders on both sides. Someone in North Carolina writes about what some church in Texas is doing that's apostasy. Someone in Tennessee writes about what some church in California is doing that's heresy. The casualties mount and Satan wins!

It is truly sad that every position on any given issue has its supporters who sincerely believe that they are on God's side or, perhaps better yet, they have God on their side. Each slaughters the other in the name of God. What may be even more tragic is there seems to be no end in sight. Will the church have to have it's own Gettysburg where the casualties are so horrendous that everyone of us left alive will demand that the civil war cease? I pray we will come to our senses before that happens.

Equally sad is the fact that all

(continued on next page)

Ernest Thigpen, Servant of God, Goes Home

Dennis Conner

Editor's note: Ernest Thigpen, well-known and highly respected in both South and North Carolina for his dedicated service to God, went home to be with the Lord on November 8, 2003 after suffering an aneurysm. He was born on September 12, 1924. The following was written by Stan Fields, deacon of Youth Ministries at the Central Church of Christ in Spartanburg, SC, and appeared in the church bulletin. Our hearts and prayers continue to be with the Thigpen family.

For over fifty years, Ernest Thigpen served God in ministry to both young and old alike, as preacher, minister, and as an elder for churches in North and South Carolina. Most recently, he served as the minister for Senior adults at Central church of Christ in Spartantaburg. In this role, he

(continued on page 10)

(The Price of Civil War continued)

the energy and resources spent in our own civil war are not available to fight the real enemy. Thousands die everyday lost and destined for eternity in hell while we attempt to defeat our own brothers and sisters in the arena of opinion, which in many cases has been defended so long that we cannot distinguish our opinion from God's truth. In fact, we have at times even made them synonymous. We cannot separate methodology and theology. Every doctrine is made to be of equal importance. Many doctrines may not be considered worth dying for, but they all seem to be worth killing over. What a tragic waste!

The battle at Gettysburg was a tragic event in our nation's history. What a waste or blood and treasure. May God help us learn a lesson in that battle and lessons from the Civil War that would force us to lay down our arms and make peace with our brothers and sisters.

I pray that all generals from both sides would order the surrender of the troops-not to the other side but to the Lordship of Christ. I pray that if we cannot present to the world a united front that would prove that we are the disciples of Christ, that God would discipline us so severely that we would have to stop the bickering and feuding in his name. I pray that we could learn the difference between contending for the faith and being contentious for the faith. If we do not, may God have mercy on our souls.

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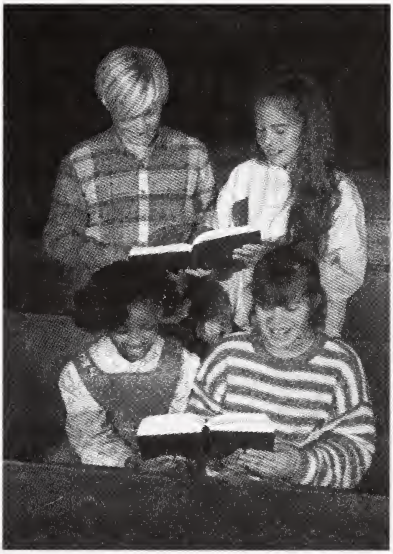

For more information contact:

Robert Kimberly,
Executive Director

Billy Mize,
Director of Development

Cindy Peden,
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The One You Feed

Ron Newberry

Legends are hard to verify as factual events. However, whether the following discussion ever really took place is less important than the lesson it teaches which certainly is true.

The story says that an elderly Cherokee Indian was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, "A battle is going on inside me. It is a dreadful fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf is evil — he is fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, competition, decision, bitterness, superiority, and ego. The other wolf is good — he is joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. You may not know it yet, but this same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other

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(Ernest Thigpen continued)

tirelessly served the older generation at Central, paying particular attention to widows by contacting each of them on a regular basis and making sure they were receiving any help they needed. He did this in an official roll for Central, but did so without pay, and very little recognition. His love for God's older children was made evident by his service to them.

Because his heart was for ministry in the churches of Christ in the Carolinas, Ernest spent his entire career serving as the pulpit minister to churches in this part of the country. But as with all pulpit ministers, his job went well beyond teaching. In counseling, visiting, praying for and working with the congregations, Ernest strove to bring as many people to Christ as God would enable him.

Ernest also served on the board of Palmetto Bible Camp since it's inception in 1966. Each of those years, Ernest delivered the first message heard at PBC's first week, better known now as 'SuperWeek.' Thousands of campers from age eight to eighteen have listened to God speak through Ernest, and I know lives have been changed through those messages. Of course, the rest of the week, Ernest was there, quietly serving in the background, taking care of whatever task his hands found to do, and always making time to chat with

The Fragrance of Christ

Mark Hudson

My wife and I just can't agree on the smelly store down at the mall. You know the one that has all the fruit flavored soaps and lotions. It's not that the aroma is unpleasant. It's just that I have strong opinions on what hand soap should smell like. Hand soap should never smell like green apples. I'm sure my arbitrary opinion is rooted in personal experience. Years ago I worked on commercial farms harvesting watermelons, cucumbers, pumpkins and gourds. I still raise a few tomatoes at home. After harvesting crops my hands often smell like overripe fruit. I like to wash with soap. Real soap! Strong soap! The last thing I want is to have my soap smell like apples or watermelon. So, my wife and I have reached a compromise. I look at books or tools at the mall while she shops the fragrant soap store. At home, I have my own soap.

The Apostle Paul wrote about an aroma and how different people reacted in opposite ways. In 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, Paul described how Christians are the sweet fragrance of Christ. The aroma of Christ is pleasant to those who are being saved. But to those are perishing, the aroma of Christ is the smell of death.

Paul's description of this triumphal procession helps us understand why some people react so negatively to goodness and righteousness. The same aroma of Christ is life to some and death to others. We should not be surprised when some speak evil of godliness. More importantly, we should tune our senses to love the same things valued by Christ.

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those he came in contact with.

We sit now in shock, because his passing was so sudden. And we wonder how we will ever move on without his kind service, caring words, loving smile, and firm handshake. I think the answer is found by looking to his memory, and by remembering the words of Paul, who said, "*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Ernest's life has shown us exactly how we are to carry on. His life was spent in service to others and that service spills over as an example for us to follow for our own lives. If you have been touched as I have by his service, or by watching him serve, honor his memory. Follow his example. The example of Christ.

Thanksgiving

Billy Mize

If I had the power to adopt a holiday from our culture and invest it with the meaning its name implies, Thanksgiving Day would be my choice. It would not be my choice because of feasting, football, and parades on TV. It would be my choice because the virtue of thanksgiving is basic to the character and spirit our gracious and giving heavenly Father desires us to cultivate.

Thanksgiving, the grace of gratitude, is one of the most persistent and pervasive themes of the Bible. A brief look at the KJV concordance of the Bible shows the words thank, thanks, thankful, thanksgiving, and thankfulness occurring about 130 times. Other versions would have about the same number of occurrences.

The first mention of thanksgiving in the Old Testament is in Leviticus 7:12. In the next verse we find, "*Besides the cakes, he shall offer his unleavened bread with the sacrifice of thanksgiving and his peace offerings.*" Thanksgiving is not specifically mentioned in connection with sacrifices prior to Leviticus; however, it is reasonable to assume that it was a part of the meaning of sacrifice from the beginning.

Throughout the Bible, the giving of thanks is closely associated with worship. In the Old

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(The One You Feed continued)
person, too."

His grandchildren thought about his words for a minute and then one child asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old and wise Indian simply replied, "The one you feed."

The war that rages within each of us is between those same two wolves. Romans 7 depicts this war in vivid detail. What we want to do we fail to accomplish. What we declare we will not do we end up doing. Galatians 5 explores the wolves too. Paul calls them "works of the flesh" and "the fruit of the spirit." Jesus describes these wolves as the *broad way that leads to destruction and the narrow way that leads to life.* We are either children of light or children of darkness. We either follow the God of heaven or the ruler of this world. We are either children of God or children of the devil.

Which one of the wolves will win our lives? Which one will win in *your* life? It depends on which one you feed.

Testament, it is associated with praise as well as sacrifice. In the New Testament, it is associated with the Lord's Supper, prayer, and singing.

Paul's writing to the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 8-9 is a remarkably rich treatise on thanksgiving. First of all, like bookends in the beginning and ending verses of these two chapters, he refers to the grace of God. God's grace was exhibited in the generosity of the Macedonian churches in helping the poor saints of Jerusalem. Grace and thanksgiving are inextricably bound together. They share the same root word in translation.

"Grace and thanksgiving are inextricably bound together."

In these two chapters, thanksgiving is tied with doing good and receiving good. Those who did the acts of generosity glorified God and those who received the generosity responded in thanksgiving to God. Paul ends chapter nine with the statement, "*Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift.*"

It is important to teach children to say thank you when someone helps them or gives them something. It is imperative to instill a spirit of thanksgiving in their character. Consider this quote from an article in *Christian Parenting Today*, Jan/Feb 1999 by Suzanne Fisher. She states in her article, "*Raising Thankful Kids*", "If I could guarantee few things that my children would carry into adulthood, one would be a grateful heart. Gratitude is essential to a deep, maturing faith in God, because it defines who we are, who God is and what we expect of life."

Consider these words from Klynne Snodgrass in his comments on Ephesians 5:20 in the *NIV Application Commentary-Ephesians*, pp. 310-11. "The second mark of the Spirit, thanksgiving, is given only perfunctory attention by most Christians, but it may well be the most important activity we do. As several people have pointed out, sin is basically ingratitude, and in Christianity, religion is grace and ethics is gratitude. The giving of thanks is the first act after the recognition that we are not independent creatures but people who owe allegiance to God and have been blessed by him."

Thanksgiving Day has significant meanings attached to it in addition to feasting, football and parades. The autumn season, family and harvest are all important to the

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When Heaven Came

Kent Massey

Several years ago, a college professor from Salt Lake City decided to do a little Christmas experiment. He randomly chose 600 names from the telephone books of several large American cities and sent personalized Christmas cards to each one. He included his return address on the cards. From the 600 cards he mailed, he received a startling one hundred and seventeen responses.

One response said, "I just got out of the hospital, and how good it was to hear from a longtime, wonderful friend!" That person must have had amnesia.

Another card said, "We had difficulty at first remembering who you were, but after some thought, we remembered. Please give our kindest regards to your father. He is a wonderful man." A very creative memory!

The best reply said, "It was really great to hear from you after all these years. We will be in Salt Lake City this summer, and if you don't mind and have an extra spare room, we would like to stay with you for two or three days!" That's what friends are for!

This time of year is busy. The to-do list grows daily with decorating to be finished, shopping to be done, parties to attend, presents to wrap, and family and friends to entertain. Lights have been draped on anything that will stand still. Everything twinkles, glistens, shines, glows and blinks. After November's gradual decline into darkness, the bright festive lights of the Christmas season cheer us up, even while making us squint a bit.

The pretty paper, glittery bows, animated characters, freeze framed tableau manger scenes, fiber-optic angels, all dazzle the children-including the child inside each of us-and transform our world into a magical landscape.

The busyness of December often leads us to forget the business of December (and, in fact, the busi-

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(Thanksgiving continued)
celebration. If we truly invest the day with what its name implies, a profound sense of dependence on a gracious and caring heavenly Father, it will bring forth from us the deepest sense of thanksgiving for his bounty and blessings.

Billy and his wife, Lesley, live in Lexington, SC. Billy is the Director of Development for Southeastern Children's Home.

ness of every day). Our challenge during the holiday season, as at all other times, is not to let the holy become humdrum. On that night long ago when the Christ came into the world, it was not that way, for it was a time for excitement for a group of blue collar shepherds watching their flocks by night.

"That night some shepherds were in the fields outside the village, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terribly frightened, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. 'I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior — yes, the Messiah, the Lord — has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David! And this is how you will recognize him: You will find a baby lying in a manger, wrapped snugly in strips of cloth!' Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others — the armies of heaven — praising God: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to all whom God favors.' When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, 'Come on, let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this wonderful thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.' They ran to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. Then the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary quietly treasured these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their fields and flocks, glorifying and praising God for what the angels had told them, and because they had seen the child, just as the angel had said. (Luke 2:8-20)

"In the midst of the chaos and confusion, Jesus announced that God is here."

Being a shepherd wasn't glamorous work. While all the excitement was in the city, their duties destined them to the outskirts of town and delegated them to a life with animals instead of people. Being a shepherd wasn't the kind of job that took them to many schools for career day. On the social and economic scale, they ranked at the bottom.

But here they are settled on a hillside, recovering from a hard days work, the sheep nestled down for the night, trying to fix their sleeping bags on the cold, hard ground, when suddenly the night sky lights up and an angel appears from out of nowhere with an announcement too good to believe. For many years the Jewish nation had waited for the Messiah to come. The first people to get the good news weren't the wealthy, or the powerful, or the elite, but a handful of people from the island of misfits, a bunch of shepherds.

Imagine the excitement that hung in the air as they heard the angel hail "The Savior has been born!" It was news so good that they had to see it and then had to share it. It was a day when God gave his best-his one and only Son. On the surface it doesn't appear to be much more than a baby born to a teenage peasant girl in a barn in Palestine, but things aren't always what they seem. It was a time for excitement!

It was exciting because ***Jesus came to show us God***. Jesus came into the loneliness and horror of our world gone crazy. In the midst of the chaos and confusion, Jesus announced that God is here. Christ has come to demonstrate to us the beauty of God in a way that renews, encourages and gives us hope.

It is also exciting because ***Jesus came to demonstrate the love of God***. When Jesus became like us, he didn't just preach on platitudes of love. He lived it. He didn't just give great sermons on forgiveness. He forgave. He didn't just talk about the need for justice and righteousness. He railed against the unrighteous institutions of his day. Jesus was the embodiment of the love of God. He loved us so much that the beauty of heaven couldn't keep him there, the voices of angels couldn't talk him out of it, and the power of deity couldn't contain him. Jesus had to come.

And it is exciting because ***Jesus came to tell us that we aren't abandoned***. Steve Brown tells a story of the ugliest car he had ever seen. The side was bashed in, the doors were held with wire and the car was about eaten through with rust. The muffler was loose and loud, and every bump in the road would send a shower of sparks when it hit it. The original color had long been eaten away and a variety of different colors had been painted on through the years. But the most interesting thing about the car was the bumper sticker that was attached to a rusty fender. It read: "This Is Not An Abandoned Car."

We live in a fallen world. Much of the excitement of this world is fake and fleeting. Evil runs rampant and bad news abounds. And many times amidst the pain of this world, we wonder if anyone, especially God cares. But in a smelly manger a long time ago a baby was born that brought a message from

God. He was a sign and a Savior that said, "THIS IS NOT AN ABANDONED WORLD."

God came and that's exciting news! They were high school sweethearts who married young. A few years later, she was standing in a too small kitchen looking at a big pile of dirty dishes, two small children squalling at her feet, and a growing collection of filthy diapers in the hamper. Tears streamed down her face as she looked at her life and wondered "what if?" Her apron came off and she walked out the door.

She called later that evening and her husband answered the phone. Understandably worried and angry, he asked "Where are you?"

"How are the kids?" she asked, totally ignoring his question.

"The kids have been fed and put to bed. And they want to know, just like I do, where their mom is."

She hung up the phone that night, but it wasn't the end of the calls. She called every day for the next few months. Her husband began to plead with her to come home. He would tell her how much they missed her and how much he loved her. But whenever the conversation turned to where she was, she would hang up.

Finally the young husband couldn't take it anymore. He hired a private detective to find his wife. He did and reported that she was in a seedy hotel in another state far away. The young man borrowed money from his family and made the trip to where she was. Taking a cab from the airport to the third-rate hotel, he climbed the stairs to her room. With a sweaty brow and a trembling hand he knocked on the door. When his wife opened the door, surprised and shocked, he looked at her with teary eyes and said, "We love you so much. Please come home." She ran into his arms and melted. They went home the next day.

One day, several weeks later. The kids were in bed and the young couple was sitting in the living room. He had to ask the question that had haunted him for months. "Why wouldn't you come home? Why when I told you over and over again that I loved you and missed you, why didn't you come home?"

She looked at him and held her face close to his and locked eyes and said, "Because, before those were only words. But then you came."

The message of the angel is the exciting news that God came. And Jesus was God's personal gift to all of mankind. And how will we respond to this most precious gift?

"*For God so loved the world...*"- that's Bethlehem.

"*That he gave his one and only*

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The Invitation

Russ Jurek

Two months ago, I began substitute teaching in our county school system. My work thus far, has been almost exclusively at one middle school. I was sure going into this that my name tag, with the word "Substitute" in bold letters, was more an invitation than anything else. When students see a substitute teacher with that name tag, they see an invitation to do whatever they want. When corrections in student behavior are attempted by the substitute, they are often answered with, "Mrs. (Teacher's name) lets us do it." Determined not to lose control of the classroom, I quickly respond by saying, "Do I look like Mrs. (Teacher's name)? When you come into my classroom you are going to behave yourselves!" I hold the students up to high and strict standards of behavior. Most of the students have gotten the message, "When you go into Dr. Russ' class, you better behave!" One student stopped me in the hall the other day and asked who I was subbing for. When I told her the teacher's name, and it wasn't any of hers, she said, "Oh! I was hoping I would have you. I've never had you as a sub yet but some of my friends told me you are really good." Though there are some students who still need convincing, most of the students now see my name tag not as a license to misbehave but as an invitation to learn.

I got to thinking about the difference between the kids that behave and those that don't. I've concluded that a major factor is the invitation they receive from others. When they see their teachers, parents or even their peers, do they see an invitation to be rude and disrespectful or one to be kind and respectful? I believe it depends on the level of expectation from the person. My children grew to be kind and respectful because my wife and I held them to those expectations. We did not allow them to behave

(continued on page 20)

(When Heaven Came continued)

Son..." - that's Calvary.

"That whoever believes in him should not perish..." - that's salvation.

"*But have eternal life.*" - that's forever.

Kent Massey can be contacted *at 4900 Providence Rd., Charlotte, NC 28226. He can also be reached by e-mail at kmassey@prcoc.*

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Do Not Throw Away Your Confidence

Peter Rode

The word "backslide" as we commonly use it means to "turn back" or "turn away" from God, from one's first love, or from the gospel. It effectively means turning to Satan, to evil, or to the world. "Backsliding" describes a condition of spiritual decay which happens gradually, not like a splash of cold water on a hot, sweltering day; otherwise, we would recognize it for what it is. Satan is sly and his tactics are devious and subtle. Just as the onslaught of many diseases can be slow and insidious, the wasting away that occurs in the heart of the backslider may go unnoticed and for a long time.

Backsliding usually begins with a general feeling of spiritual indifference as one fails to focus upon spiritual things. Instead of feeding off the word of God, people fill their lives with junk food (other interests) and as a result their hunger for the word diminishes. Worship attendance usually slackens off and relationships undergo extreme stress as the conviction of the Holy Spirit becomes increasingly uncomfortable. As they ignore God's appeals to return, their zeal and concern for souls subsides due to a sense of guilt and hypocrisy, which might explain the

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(The Invitation continued)

otherwise. The kids in my classes know what I expect and they behave accordingly. When children see an invitation to act badly, they will usually accept it. Likewise, when they see an invitation to act respectfully, they will usually accept it if they know that is what is required of them.

Parents, what kind of invitation are you sending to your children? What expectations do you have of their behavior? Since their behavior is a reflection of your expectations, you only need look there to see what you are inviting them to do. God our Father has high expectations of us as parents with our children, as he tells us to "*bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.*" (Eph. 6:4). Remember this, our children will rarely disappoint us when it comes to rising to the level of our expectations. We need to constantly be checking our level.

Dr. Russ Jurek can be reached at fammat@bellsouth.net. We encourage our readers to check out his ministry website at www.familiesmatterministries.com .

He Is My Refuge

Chris Townsend

In the Lord I take refuge. How then can you say to me: 'Flee like a bird to your mountain…'" (Psalm 11:1).

Recently I was out visiting. It was a beautiful fall day and several visits were on my schedule. One of those was to be a family whose name was given

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apathy towards evangelism in many congregations. After a while, the fear of God departs and a complete re-ordering of priorities in their lives occurs. Scripture metaphorically describes this state as: serving two masters, forsaking the Lord, going our own way, leaving our first love, forgetting God, falling away, turning aside, growing cold, departing from the faith, putting a hand to the plow and looking back, "*salt that has lost its saltiness*" (Matthew 5:13), "*a dog returning to his vomit,*" and a dead branch.

Then, one day, the backslider realizes that sin is no longer abhorrent. They easily justify actions they never previously would have considered acceptable. Since their sensitivity to spiritual things is not what it once was, they feel no guilt. Their calloused hearts become stone; their consciences are seared (1 Timothy 4:2). The farther they stray the more distant the voice of God becomes, and the more difficult it is for them to find their way back. The inconsistencies in their lives may disturb them, but more often than not, they will be blind to their own spiritual state.

Like a garden that must be carefully tended, so our spiritual lives also require careful and diligent attention (2 Timothy 2:15, 21; 2 Peter 1:5-9). Spiritual growth requires a conscious effort or it will be only natural that we succumb to the ways of the flesh. It's interesting that the term "believer," as used in the New Testament, is not a noun but a participle: "one who is believing." Christian discipleship is not a one-time confession of faith, but a daily walk with Jesus.

I hope that we are all attending to our spiritual lives and focusing on the things that lead to eternal life. "*…Do not throw away your confidence,*" (Hebrews 10:35).

Peter Rode serves the Friendly Ave. Church of Christ in Greensboro, NC, and can be contacted at prode@rocketmail.net.

Forgiveness

David Kneip

I have written more than once in these pages about forgiveness, but I don't believe I've ever devoted an entire column to the topic. I'm learning more and more, though, of the power of forgiveness, and I want to share some of that with you. I believe that forgiving another person is one of the hardest things to do in life. Let me give you examples. What would you do, young ladies, if you found out that the person you thought was your best friend — the one you IM with, email with, talk on the phone with, walk the halls with — had been secretly, behind your back, sharing all of your secrets all over school? The boys

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(He Is My Refuge continued)

to me by another preacher. I had tried to find them before, but without success. On this day, however, someone was actually home. I rang the doorbell and a woman answered it. Right behind her was her little daughter, wide-eyed and shy of the stranger who had come to their door. It was a nice visit, but that little girl stayed glued to her mother's legs. Why? Because children find a place of refuge with the one who loves them the most.

But if one is all grown up and doesn't have a parent to flee to, what does one do?

That's the problem confronting the psalmist in the long ago. In the eleventh Psalm the writer is confronted by enemies who snipe at him. Using figurative language his friends tell him that "they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart." No one knows where the vicious rumors are coming from, the scheming and the lies. For the psalmist's friends, it is a tense and terrifying situation. Their advice? "Flee like a bird to your mountain." However, it is advice the psalmist rejects.

Why flee when you have faith in God? The psalmist, quite possibly David, knew that God was capable of seeing the difference between the righteous and the wicked, and he believed that God would rain down punish upon those who afflicted him. With such a faith he would not flee! He would find his refuge where it had always been — in God.

Do we?

Chris Townsend preaches for the Central Church of Christ in Salisbury, NC. He can be contacted at P.O. Box 2583, Salisbury, NC 28145.

you like, dates you have had, your most embarrassing moments, what you like to eat at midnight in your pajamas... all the stuff you thought was sacred between you. You'd been wondering why people were giving you funny looks in the halls and giggling. You had thought it was just your imagination, but now you know that it was real, and who was to blame. Or guys, what if you found out that your best friend — the guy you hang around with, who's always over at your house — has been stealing from you? Take your pick of what's important to you — sports equipment, books, cards, tools, car stuff, whatever — he's been slowly, deliberately, taking things from you, not because he needs them but because he wants them. You thought it was maybe your little sister, but now you know who it REALLY was. What do you do? Can you forgive that person? Let me give you again my definition of forgiveness. It doesn't just mean "I'm not mad at you anymore." It doesn't mean you magically forget everything they've ever done. Forgiveness is saying and living, "I know what you did to me, but I'm not going to let that get in the way of our relationship, and I'm not going to treat you any worse because you've done this to me." In other words, no revenge, no secret bad feelings toward that person. Remember, "*love... keeps no record of wrongs*" (1 Corinthians 13:5). I know there's a lot of things bound up with this, all of which deserve an entire article to themselves: having the courage to go to the other person and talk to them about their sin as Jesus instructed (Matthew 18:15); leaving room for God's vengeance (Romans 12:19); the repentance of the other person (although, as a wise person once said, "true humility is forgiving someone even when they have not yet repented!"). When it comes down to it, though, could you forgive? Could you really allow someone else's sin against you to change your behavior toward them only in trying to help them not sin anymore (John 8:11)? It's difficult, to be sure, but you need to know that in forgiving someone, you give them one of the greatest gifts possible. I know, your enemies, or those who persecute you, may be the last people to whom you want to give gifts. But, as a way of blessing them rather than cursing (Romans 12:14; Matthew 5:44), you can share with them the gift of forgiveness. Some of you have felt the power of the knowledge of God's forgiveness, and I say that you have the power to give a similar gift to others. Let me testify: I have a new roommate (sometimes I call her "my wife!").

(continued on next page)

Know Wonder

Kent Massey

i love this time of year. Hands down, it is my favorite part of the calendar. The Indian summer days of September transition to the crisp window-opening evenings of October to the first frost of a November morning. In a few short weeks, God will use his nature palette to create breathtaking beauty as maples change a flaming orange, red apples twinkle against a forest of green and the setting sun shines shafts of rose that will slowly burn to shades of crimson and purple.

Many will jump in their cars to enjoy a weekend getaway to take in the beauty of God's work. Most of us will spend the weekends raking the freshly fallen leaves and preparing our yards for a long winter's nap. It will be a time in our busy, bustling, bursting at the

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(Forgiveness continued)

Sometimes I sin against her, which I hate, but it sometimes happens. When she forgives me — when she assures me that my sin will not change her love for me — it is a whole new world. She doesn't guarantee that I will never sin against her again — by no means! But what she does makes me want to sin less. No guarantees for her, but she is following Christ in forgiving. I have recently learned a song by a man named Juergen Werth that tries to give images to this gift, and I want to close this column by sharing those images with you. Remember, this is what you have to take out into the world, and it is in giving that you really receive. Like a party after long sadness; like a fire in the night. Like a letter after long silence; like old enemies, hand in hand. Like a sunrise, a shining face; like a key to one imprisoned. Like a way out of pressure; like an "I-love-you-anyway" kiss. Like an unhoped-for greeting; like a leaf on dead branches. Like rain in the desert or fresh dew on dry land; like the sounds of home for those long missed. Like a word from dead lips; like a vision awakened by hope. Like a light on dark cliffs; like a piece of earth, newly discovered. Like the springtime, like the morning. Like a song, or maybe a poem. Like life, like love, like God himself, the true light. That is forgiveness. That is what true peace must be like. That is forgiveness.

David and his wife, Cynthia, are currently living in Germany. He can be contacted at dck99a@acu.edu.

seams lives to know wonder at the beauty of the earth.

Wonder isn't something that you can schedule automatically into your Palm Pilot. Wonder is something that happens spontaneously and is unplanned. It is that moment that makes your heart skip a beat...takes your breath away...leaves you speechless and stops you in your tracks. To know wonder is to have time stop on a dime and leave you with a memory and moment that will forever be priceless.

To know wonder is not just for the young and carefree. Yes our youth makes us more alive to the wonders that surround us. Yet I love going out on a fall evening with my dog Chester. Because he takes time to run, chase and pounce on every falling leaf, investigate every stick in the yard, sniff every bug that crawls along the grass, and of course stick his nose and body into the earth and roll around. He reminds me that in the early autumn of my years, I still need to take time to know wonder.

A sense of wonder comes when we cultivate an openness to all that cannot be understood or even hardly believed. Bernal Diaz, who accompanied Cortes on the conquest of Mexico and subsequently recorded the adventure in his *The Conquest of New Spain* recalls the Spaniards' first spellbound vision of the Aztec capitol city: "Gazing on such wonderful sights, we did not know what to say, or whether what appeared before us was real."

To know wonder is to be blown away by God's beauty, blown away by God's bounty and blown away by God's bevy of blessing.

Just as in the natural world there are occasions and occupants that evoke a sense of wonder, there is in the spiritual world similar moments for examining and exclaiming wonderment. The prophet Isaiah knew that feeling:

"*In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. Hovering around him were mighty seraphim, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with the remaining two they flew. In a great chorus they sang, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty! The whole earth is filled with his glory!" The glorious singing shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire sanctuary was filled with smoke.*

Then I said, "My destruction is sealed, for I am a sinful man and a member of a sinful race. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD Almighty!" Then one of the seraphim flew over to the altar, *and he picked up a burning coal with a pair of tongs. He touched my lips with it and said, "See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven." Then I heard the Lord asking, "Whom should I send as a messenger to my people? Who will go for us?" And I said, "Lord, I'll go! Send me,"* (Isaiah 6:1-8, NLT).

Isaiah has an encounter with God that is so profound that afterward he could no longer see the Lord, himself or his people in the same way. He begins to know wonder when worship happens.

Worship happens when God is radically present. Radical presence is used to describe an event or experience that transcends the ordinary and is different from other events or experiences of its kind. To say that God is radically present is not to deny that He is always present everywhere, but rather to describe those times when the reality of the presence of God bursts upon us in unusually powerful ways. It cannot be programmed, controlled or manipulated. It can only be experienced.

That experience can come to us anywhere, anytime. For Isaiah it happened in the temple, but God doesn't limit holy moments to holy places. For Moses, God's radical presence was discovered in a barren wilderness; for Elijah it was a mountain hideout; for Saul it was on a bounty hunting mission to Damascus. And the most radical presence of God imaginable-the Incarnation-began among the distinctive smells of a barn and ended among the death throes of convicted criminals.

Isaiah's experience also teaches that the radical presence of God is found not just in the extraordinary but also in the ordinary. God can use the ordinary to show himself as easily as he uses the extraordinary. More important than where we are, is our willingness to see God in what is going on around us. Isaiah was not content to experience only worship; he was open to an experience of God. We are often surprised when we know wonder as our hearts are opened to seeing Him in the ordinary events of life.

Worship happens when our inadequacy is met by the more than adequate grace of God. Isaiah recognized the spiritual shortcomings of himself and his people. Under King Uzziah, the people have experienced the good life. They had peace and prosperity and everything was looking up. And all of these good things had been achieved by human effort and good luck.

Possibly that is why worship experiences sometimes leave us lacking. We are happy with the way things are. We have a comfortable existence. Yes we need God, but only when we need to clean up a mess around the edges of our lives. We certainly don't desire his radical presence because it may reveal the inadequacies of our carefully kept existence. We are willing to meet God but only on our terms.

Worship is okay as long as it helps us feel good about who we are, makes us feel safe because we have all the right answers and practices. It is tolerable as long as it confines its focus on how others can achieve our level of spirituality. It works for us as long as we tear down everyone else in an effort to hide our own failures and weaknesses as a fellowship. Worship is good as long as we fulfill our weekly scorecard.

Isaiah and his fellow priests felt they had captured the essence of God in their religious ceremony. However, they quickly learned that when one truly confronts the radical presence of God, all claims to wisdom, goodness, right orthodoxy and self-sufficiency melt away and one is left looking for a seraph's wing to hide behind.

God doesn't reveal his radical presence simply to overwhelm us and make us feel worthless. Instead his presence reminds us of his empowering grace that meets, transforms and transcends our awareness of our own sinfulness and inadequacy. Isaiah confesses his sinfulness and the God impresses on him the grace that makes him clean. It was only because Isaiah was honest to God that God was able then to use him and make him a prophet.

Worship happens when a divine call is answered with a grateful response. God's question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" was not directed at Isaiah but to the seraphim. Isaiah heard the question and stepped forward. Isaiah didn't know where the "whom" was being sent or what the task was. He didn't need to wait for a well developed plan before he stepped forward. His quick response was the response of gratitude. Gratitude for God's forgiveness; gratitude for an experience to know wonder like he had never known before; gratitude that motivates positive action. Gratitude and worship, which go hand in hand.

When you know wonder you cannot remain still. When you know wonder you cannot remain silent. When you know wonder, you will not do anything less than respond with gratitude. When you know wonder, worship happens.

Know wonder this fall season and every season of your life!

Return to Africa

David French

After nearly twenty years of ministry in this country, my wife and I have decided to return to Africa (we served in Kenya in the early 1980's). The Sunset School of Preaching in Lubbock, Texas has asked us to serve as the Dean for a new school they intend to start next year in Lusaka, Zambia. The Sycamore View church in Memphis, TN has agreed to serve as our sponsoring congregation. So, Lord willing, our family will be in Zambia one year from now.

There are many reasons why we, at age 46, have accepted this challenge. Mission work has largely been carried out by young men and women fresh out of college (which included my wife and I twenty years ago). But, after making several teaching trips to Africa over the past six years, I have now become convinced that there is an urgent need for more experienced, older missionaries who can provide the greater depth and wisdom that is necessary for leadership training.

The Church of Christ in Africa now numbers more than 800,000 members, having almost doubled in the last 12 years! Within another decade there will be more members of the church in Africa than in the USA. The problem, however, is that the church in Africa is still woefully immature and suffering from an incredible shortage of trained leaders. At the very moment that this phenomenal growth has taken place, the number of missionaries in Africa (who can provide training) has decreased by one-third in just the last ten years! This is why we feel compelled to return to Africa. We now have more than enough African Christians to evangelize Africa. What we don't have is sufficient numbers of trained leaders. It now seems to me that this is what we need to be directing our efforts toward in Africa. Instead of doing the church planting ourselves (which requires learning tribal languages), we need to be training Africans to do this cross-cultural evangelistic work. This is what we intend to do in going to Zambia.

Zambia is among our oldest mission works in Africa. John Sheriff (1919) and George Scott (1927) were the first western missionaries from the Churches of Christ to work in Zambia. Other pioneers included Alvin Hobby, Will Short and Dow Merritt. These all worked in the southern province where they established the Namwianga Mission. Today there are approximately 45,000 members of the church with about 830 churches, 62% of whom live in the southern province (Tonga tribe).

Not only are the churches predominately southern and Tonga,

(continued on page 32)

Thank God It's By Grace

Jerry Senn

Recently I learned of a four-year-old girl who, when being punished for misbehavior by standing in the corner, would let the tears flow freely for about two minutes. Then, the deluge would be shut off like a water faucet and she would announce, "Ok, I'm done!"

Her humorous conduct (perhaps not so humorous to the parents) set me to thinking. Is that little girl really so very different from the rest of us? Like the four-year-old, we tend to think the momentary difficulties of life are sufficient "punishment" for our failings. In an age of self-esteem, self-fulfillment and self-actualization, we find it hard to admit wrongdoing (even serious, obvious ones). We'll call them anything — mistakes, misunderstandings, errors, indiscretions — or any number of things except abject failure or sin. Oh yes, we admit to being sinners, yet we often find it difficult to admit we've done anything really bad. Surely God won't keep us out of heaven for such "trivial" imperfections! For many people, fear of hell is an almost forgotten emotion.

I suppose that's one way of looking at life, but it doesn't seem to be God's perspective on it. The reality is that not only are we all sinners, but when we sin we literally "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, NIV). Other translations help us get a handle on what this means. *The New Living Translation* reads: "fall short of God glorious standard." Eugene Petersen's *The Message* says: "and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us." *The New Century Version* puts it: "All have sinned and are not good enough for God's glory."

Regardless of how you look at it, all sin (even "little" ones) takes us away from the life God meant for us and makes us unworthy of heaven. That's the reality of life on this earth and we need to accept it.

However, that isn't the whole account. As long-time radio commentator Paul Harvey so eloquently puts it, "Now, for the rest of the story."

Romans 3 continues, "*Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners...and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious life God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus*

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Let Us Consider How to Stimulate Each Other to Love and Good Deeds

Gary Vance

Imagine the feelings of a small band of survivors of a shipwreck who are adrift at sea, and then they are miraculously rescued. Because of their common experience they have developed a camaraderie that breaks down the cultural, social and economic barriers between them. As they make their way to shore they share stories of their lives and promise to stay in touch after they reach their destinations. Yet, once they have returned to the routines of their lives the promises break apart like the ship from which they escaped. Without constant contact the camaraderie of the once shipwrecked party fades to a distant memory.

Very much like our rescued friends, many recovering addicts around the world have found a fond fellowship that breaks down the various walls that society erects to divide us. They have a common problem from which they are in the process of being rescued. Every day of the week (and in some places many times a day) these rescued people meet for mutual encouragement, without which they know that they will never reach the intended shore.

As Christians we also have a common problem — sin. It has many faces and many effects and is ultimately fatal ("*...for the wages of sin is death,*" Romans 6:23). But we have One who rescues us (Jesus Christ, the Righteous) and who will take us to the eternal shores of heaven. Since our problems have a deadly outcome, should we not meet often to help and encourage each other to reach our destination? When the shore to which our rescue lies is an eternal one, do we not need the mutual encouragement to continue on the path toward ever-

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(By Grace continued)
Christ," (*The Message*) .

When we stand before God in the judgment, it won't help to minimize our sinfulness regardless of how we do it. What counts will be God's grace through the sacrifice of Jesus. Our best appeal for mercy is to simply admit, "Father, I have nothing to offer except that I belong to your Son." "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," (Romans 8:1). Amen. Praise the Lord!

The Sin No One Confesses

Roger Coffman

Success in any form is a potentially hazardous seduction away from God and toward the false security of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Jesus once told his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven," (Mark 10:23). Status and power cannot always be measured in dollars and things. With any advantage or privilege comes the danger that it will become more important to us than the God who gave it to us.

"Entitlement" is the modern day trap of untold millions. Because our constitution does guarantee us the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," many think that government must guarantee prosperity and success to all. When that does not happen, then greed rears its ugly head.

In spite of the fact that greed is one of the sins that new never hear confessed, it is condemned in Scripture in some pretty harsh terms. The apostle Paul calls it "idolatry" (Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5).

There is nothing wrong with having as much money as some one else, or when seeing something you want, buying it and enjoying it. Sin occurs when the ambition to have or to do leads us away from God, corrupts our relationship with others, or destroys our self-control and diverts us from our responsibilities.

Health, popularity, influence and money are not bad things, but it is wrong to define human worth in terms of any or all of these things. And to live one's life in pursuit of one or more of these things to the neglect of God, family, friends or personal integrity certainly is wrong. Let us be thankful for our blessings, but not controlled by them.

Roger Coffman serves the Church of Christ on Hilton Head Island, SC.

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lasting safety? Why can we not see our own need to meet together as often as possible to defeat our common foe (Satan) and exhort each other to our common goal (eternal life in the presence of God)? Otherwise, we, too may end up shipwrecked by the storms of life.

Gary Vance is a member of the Yadkinville Church of Christ. He may be contacted at 617 West Main St., Yadkinville, NC 27055.

(Return to Africa continued)

but they are also small and immature. And, although Zambia has proven to be a receptive mission field, the church in Zambia has not experienced the kind of growth that has taken place elsewhere in Africa. The primary reason for this lack of growth in recent years is due primarily to the deficit of leadership training. There has been no school in Zambia dedicated strictly to the task of leadership training. Those wishing to attend a school of preaching must travel all the way to Kenya or Swaziland - a distance of more than 1,000 miles. Thus, there are only a few leaders who have had any Bible training.

Church leaders in Zambia have been well aware of this need for quite some time. More than 15 years ago, they bought a 22 acre plot of land near Lusaka in order to start such a school. Several efforts were made, but nothing ever really materialized. In 2002, these leaders made an appeal to Sunset International Bible Institute in Lubbock, Texas to help them with this project. After several trips to Zambia and realizing the great need for such a Bible school, Sunset agreed to take on this challenge. Sunset, then, asked us to become the Dean for this new school to be called the Mapepi Bible Institute.

There are several reasons why Zambia needs this school dedicated to training church leaders. First is *the need for a renewal in evangelism and church-planting in Zambia.* The primary reason the church in Zambia has not grown numerically nor advanced into the other provinces is due to the lack of leadership training and foreign assistance (which is still needed). In fact, the church in Zambia is still considered a Tonga-tribe religion.

One of the reasons for starting this school in Lusaka is to shift the center of the church out of the Tonga region so as to create a national identity for the church. We envision the school becoming a mechanism for encouraging new church plantings throughout Zambia, especially in the more populated regions of Lusaka, the Copperbelt, and the Northern province. We see this school as a means for facilitating a new wave of evangelistic activity in Zambia.

Second, as a consequence of the leadership deficit, there is the related problem of *spiritual immaturity in the church.* Africans are becoming Christians at the rate of 20,000 per day. In fact, the Church of Christ in Africa has nearly doubled in just the last 12 years. But, such phenomenal growth only increases the demand for more trained leaders who can lead these churches on to maturity in Christ.

Yet, at the very moment the demand for leadership training has increased, the number of missionaries in Africa (who can provide training) has decreased by a third over the last ten years. The result is acute immaturity in the church. Bible knowledge is woefully inadequate and the continual reliance on witchcraft and traditional religious practices remains strong in our churches.

This is especially true for Zambia where there is no school for leadership training. As a consequence, our churches in Zambia are suffering from superficial knowledge of the Christian faith and are still walking in the ways of the world (witchcraft).

The challenge of urban evangelism represents a third reason why we need this school in Zambia. Most of our past missionary work in Africa has been dedicated to rural efforts. We have done little to evangelize the cities of Africa since this was where the population lived. But, this is now changing. Africa is moving to the cities in huge numbers. Nowhere is this more true than in Zambia. It is estimated that nearly 50% of Zambia now live in the cities (a percentage that is higher than most of Africa). One of the reasons for locating this new school in Lusaka is so that we might facilitate the growth of the church in Lusaka and use this city as the context in which to train students for urban evangelism. In fact, it is our hope to take students on numerous campaigns to plant and mature new churches in the cities of Zambia.

A fourth reason why we need this school in Zambia has to do with *the spread of Islam* into Africa where it is now growing twice as fast as Christianity. Islam is now spreading into the southern regions of the continent and Zambia is now "ground zero" for this advance. Fueled by large sums of Arab oil-money, Muslim missionaries are now building primary schools all over Zambia in an effort to convert the next generation of Zambians. We need desperately to train new leaders who can confront Islam and halt its advance into Africa.

Finally, there is the need to evangelize those regions of Africa where we have yet to plant churches. Studies show that 90% of all our members in Africa live in just 10 of Africa's 57 countries! There are many reasons why we haven't evangelized these other countries, but it has to do primarily with the instability and civil war that has plagued these countries for decades. Zambia is of particular interest because it is centrally located to many of these countries that we have yet to evangelize. One of our dreams for this

(continued on next page)

Brotherhood News

Mark Hudson

Durham, NC... *The Cole Mill Rd. Church of Christ* celebrated the opening of its new building addition with an open house and singing November 8-9.

Clemmons, NC... The 60th Annual Carolina Lectures, the oldest regional lectureship among churches of Christ in America, will be hosted this year by the *Warners Chapel Church of Christ*. The date is April 4-8, 2004, and the theme for the program is "A Changeless God For a Changing World."

Yadkinville, NC... *The Yadkinville Church of Christ* will be celebrating its 25th anniversary with a homecoming service on the afternoon of January 18. All friends and former members are being invited to share the day with the church.

Hilton Head Island, SC... *Roger Coffman*, preacher for the Hilton Head Island church, has announced to the congregation that he and his wife, Milbrey, intend to retire and move to Chattanooga, TN, to be closer to family. He will remain at Hilton Head for six to nine months and will assist the church in securing a new preacher.

(Return to Africa continued)
new school in Zambia is to train and encourage Africans to serve as missionaries to these unevangelized countries.

Unlike East and West Africa, southern Africa does not yet have a strong, vibrant church presence (e.g. Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria). Our dream is use this new school in Zambia as a catalyst for growth that makes Zambia a pillar of strength for the church in southern Africa.

However, before we can make this dream a reality, it will be necessary that we raise our own financial support. The Pine Valley congregation has graciously agreed to continue our salary at least through March. This means, therefore, that we must raise a considerable amount of support within a few short months. If you or your church can assist us, please contact me either by email (dfrench@sycamoreview.org) or by phone at (901) 791-2255; (901) 372-1874. I will be happy to arrange a time to make a presentation on the work in Zambia. You may also visit our web page for further information: www.zambiamissions.org

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Editor *(Name and complete mailing address)*
DENNIS CONNER
705 OLD ROCKFORD RD.
DOBSON, NC 27017

Managing Editor *(Name and complete mailing address)*
RICHARD BOESE
1020 LEWISVILLE-VIENNA RD.
LEWISVILLE, NC 27023

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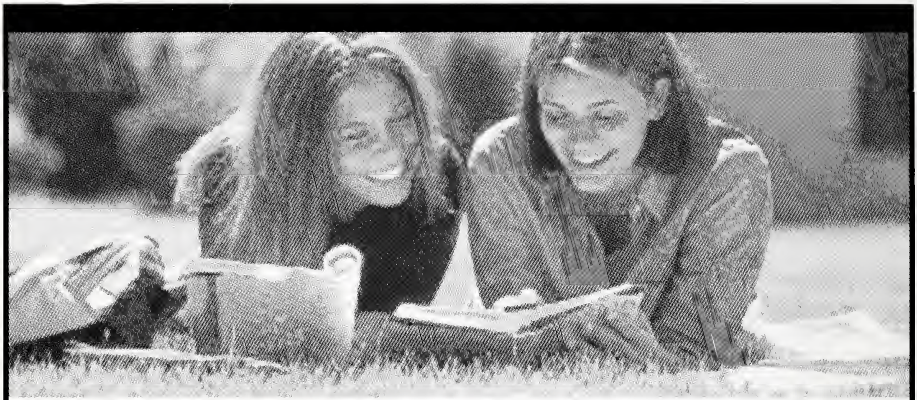

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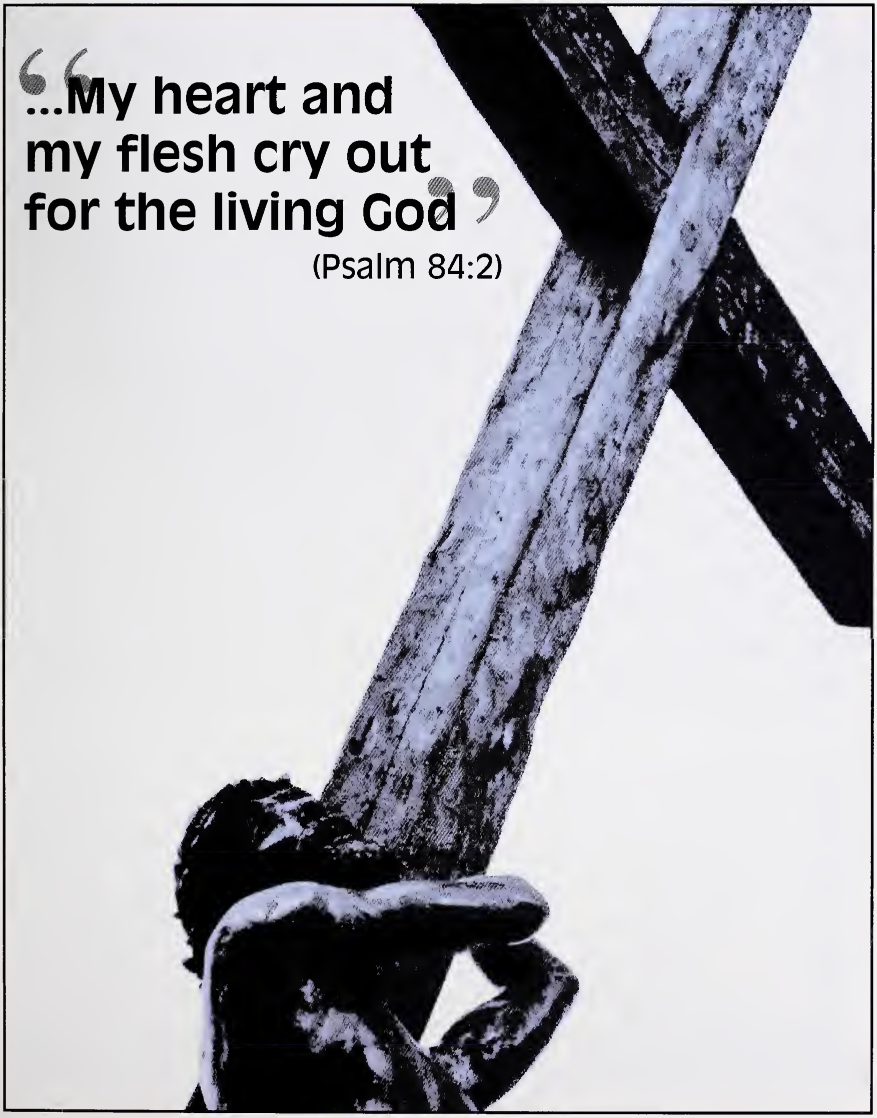

“...My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God”

(Psalm 84:2)

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Editorial & Publication Staff
Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
Catherine Thacker, Design Editor

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Dennis Conner
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Address news items to:
Mark Hudson
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Resident Aliens

by Dennis Conner

While there are some who still cling to the notion that America is a Christian nation, the evidence all around us suggests that Christian convictions are no longer a part of the mainstream of our society. While it is debatable that our nation ever was truly Christian, Christian faith and principles were at least held in generally high regard. Now that such is generally not the case, how are we Christians to respond to this new situation? Do we put together political organizations to elect officials that will promote our agenda? Do we boycott? Do we rage against the darkness? Do we withdraw into ourselves and keep ourselves isolated from the "unclean?"

Peter opens his first letter with the words, "To God's elect, strangers in the world…" (1 Peter 1:1). Perhaps the best way to respond to the new situation in our country—this less than hospitable environment—is to come to a clearer understanding of our identity. Ok, and just who are we? We are the elect of God. We are God's chosen people, and His people have never been contenders in popularity races. Peter writes to a faith community that is facing severe trials for its faith. He understood that if they were to survive, it would be essential that they have a clear understanding of their identity, along with the lifestyle and promises associated with that identity.

> "They understood that their citizenship lay somewhere beyond"

To underscore what it means to be one of God's chosen, Peter refers to the believers as "strangers" (or aliens, exiles) in the world. It's a term that refers to people who have been displaced and have no place to call their own. "We live here," Peter says, "but we don't belong here." It should come as no surprise to us that our faith makes us strangers in our own land. Early Christianity did not come into existence and grow and flourish in the midst of public favor. It did not grow because of its popular appeal. It grew because of the convictions and commitment of the early believers. They understood their identity. They understood that their citizenship lay somewhere beyond. We find ourselves today in a situation that is increasingly similar to that of our early brothers and sisters, and there is no evidence that the tide will soon turn.

So, what does it mean for us today to be aliens, exiles, strangers in a strange land? What it was that made the early Christian community exiles. Was it the color of their skin? Their nationality? Their social status, or lack of it? "No" to all of these. They could easily have allowed themselves to be assimilated into the larger Roman society, but they didn't. What made them exiles was their commitment and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. As the elect of God they professed exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord! That allegiance brought them into direct conflict with the allegiances of the culture around them and made them a rejected people.

What of our allegiances? It's interesting, for instance, that many believers today equate true Christian faith with a particular political affiliation and allegiance. For some, one cannot be a Democrat and be a true Christian! For others, one cannot be a Republican and be a true Christian (a Republican may be a fundamentalist, but not a true Christian!). To be an exile, a stranger in this world, means that Christians find their identity only in Christ, and nothing in this world.

For others of us, career becomes our identity. Or we become defined by sectarian loyalties, but not Jesus. We are less in conflict with the world than we are each other! To be a stranger to this world, however, is to be attached exclusively to Jesus Christ.

To take the concept of "stranger" even further, this supreme allegiance to Christ meant a different set of moral values (addressed in 1:13–19) comprehended in a fundamental call to a holy lifestyle motivated by reverence for God: "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written, 'Be holy, because I am holy…live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear…'" (v. 15-17). As "strangers" in this world we are called to distinctiveness in lifestyle.

A holy life is a life "set apart" and consecrated to God. In this life our values are not the world's values. Our priorities as citizens of heaven are different from those of citizens of the secular. Rather than being conformed to the culture, we are to be transformed by the Spirit. From a truly biblical perspective, distinctiveness is to be understood, then, in terms of a lifestyle that is radically different from that of the world as it reflects and imitates the holy character of God himself. This call to distinctiveness means that as Christians we will have to be known not only by what we believe, but how we live in everything we do. The scope of the holy life is all-encompassing.

We should not be surprised, then, by the worldliness of the world (how else would we expect them to act?). Let us instead give greater diligence to our calling to be strangers in a strange land. **Ω**

Plus Ultra!

by Ron Newberry

History has seen numerous nations rise to world power status. Few maintained that rank for long periods of time and the flame of greatness diminished. However, while they burned, the flame blazed with prominence. Consider France, Spain, Britain, Rome, Egypt, Babylon, etc.

Voluminous works have been produced to recount the rise and fall of such nations and empires. Occasionally some historian notes the underlying spirit that permeates the nations that rise to power. At certain junctures in history the lust for power burning in the heart of the leaders motivated them to conquer through force. At other times the quest for adventure and discovery has compelled nations to do what was thought impossible.

In the early 1960's President Kennedy challenged the nation to put a man on the moon and return him safely to earth by the end of the decade. With the equivalent of Commodore 64 (remember those?) technology we stunned the world by doing exactly that in July 1969. In the early morning hours of December 14, 1972, astronaut Commander Eugene Cernan hopped to the lower rung of the ladder, carefully climbed up the nine rungs, scrambled across the small platform, and squeezed carefully through the tight-fitting hatch at the front of the lunar module. Cernan was the last human being to stand on the surface of the Moon—he might not be the last.

It's now 2004. President Bush is reported to be considering a new challenge to go back to the moon, establish a permanent base there as a jumping off place for a manned trip to Mars. Ambitious? Yes! Doable? Yes! The only real question I believe is, "Do we have the national will to boldly go where man has gone before and then beyond?"

Flash back five hundred years.

> "Eternity surely holds the greatest potential for those who live by faith"

Perhaps there's a lesson to be learned from one of those nations I referred to above. Spain was once a world power that dominated the Mediterranean. Positioned to control the Straits of Gibraltar Spain held an advantage among seafaring nations of the time.

In the 15th century, Spain's royal family used the Pillars of Hercules and the Straits of Gibraltar as an emblem of their place in the world. Their motto read *Ne Plus Ultra* ('no more beyond'). The meaning was clear: Spain was the boundary of the known world. Nothing of consequence could surely exist beyond their well defined borders. However, the exploits of Columbus' demanded that the motto needed to be reworked. This was deftly accomplished by the humanist scholar Marliano who, in 1517, simply removed the negative so that now the motto read *Plus Ultra* ('more beyond').

Spain underscored a maxim of history: we cannot discover new worlds unless we are willing to lose sight of the shore. That is true of Spain. That is true of men who walk on the moon. That will be true for those who one day will walk on Mars. Is it any different for the church of the 21st century?

Historically every generation seems to think that it has discovered all there is to discover about the Bible, God and Truth. "We have finally arrived" may not be verbalized, but it appears to be the attitude of many of us. Holding open the possibility that we might be wrong about some point or have been misled about some passage of Scripture has driven some to the attitude actually expressed to me by a former church leader: "There are some topics I won't study because I might have to change my mind." *Ne Plus Ultra!* There is nothing beyond their current understanding of Scripture. If our spiritual ancestors (Campbell, Stone, even the apostle Paul himself, et al) had been armed with that point of view and promoted that kind of attitude we would have remained tethered to the past which needed to be left in the past and to traditions that needed to be jettisoned.

There are a total of twelve humans who got to explore another world as representatives of the people of the United States of America. Gene Cernan said as he prepared to leave the moon's surface, "We'd like to uncover a plaque that has been on the front leg of our spacecraft. I'll read what it says: 'Here man completed his first exploration of the Moon, December 1972, A.D. May the spirit of peace in which we came be reflected in the lives of all mankind'."

There are only six flags on the Moon, and all of them are the Stars and Stripes. The United States of America did it by working together. Landing men on the Moon and returning safely to Earth was a brilliant triumph of the human spirit. I wonder what marvelous adventures are yet to be experienced by us.

I also wonder what adventures await those who are willing to remain true to the only celestial guide we have—the inspired word of God—yet are willing to not be tethered to the past at the expense of the future. I wonder if we are willing to lose sight of the shore to discover new worlds in the name of Christ. I wonder if we are willing to live by faith instead of by sight. Hebrews 10:38 says, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him."

Life has more in store than we can possibly understand now. Eternity surely holds the greatest potential for those who live by faith. God is still in the business of doing more than we have ever dreamed or imagined if we are willing to traverse the spiritual universe by faith. No matter where we are and how far we have come, no matter how many errors have been corrected and how many old paths restored, no matter how much we know and understand, *Plus Ultra!* His word is final and no further revelation is needed, but as far as our adventure in the kingdom is concerned *Plus Ultra*—praise God—*Plus Ultra!* **Ω**

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Faith & Tradition

by Peter Rode

It's a new year—2004! As the year stretches out ahead of you, what are you expecting? What have you resolved to do this year that you haven't done in the past? How are you going to stretch and improve yourself? So many questions. So many answers, but if we don't ask ourselves these questions and if we don't plan ahead, we're going to drift and not do anything special with our lives. We have two choices. Either we're going to react to life and circumstances as they happen to us—which far too many people do—or we're going to be proactive and take charge of our lives so that we can dictate how we're going to live (Ephesians 5: 15-17).

The second choice is somewhat daunting and difficult, but it's going to lead to a far more productive and satisfying life. If we're not careful, our past—our habits and traditions—can be the enemy of God's plans for our lives and for the church. Traditions are not necessarily bad. They are comfortable because they are familiar—as comfortable as an old shoe. They fit us well and don't cause us discomfort. Traditions are powerful, too. We are creatures of habit and habits structure our days in productive patterns and keep us from perpetually reinventing the wheel. Traditions fix patterns of behavior to preserve what we think is best. For organizations traditions are institutional memories or guideposts that keep them from straying from the values and productive patterns of the past.

However, tradition can become an empty shell that is devoid of meaning and vitality. It is said that the seven last words of a dying church are, "We've never done it that way before." Tradition-bound organizations are so constrained by the past that they are unable move

> "The Christian faith is essentially about a 'now' relationship with God through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"

into the future. In such cases past traditions severely limit present possibilities.

It's not just organizations that must be able to change. We as individuals also need to change. Traditions essentially focus on the past: the values of the past, the methods of the past, and the glories of the past. They help preserve value in a world that's constantly changing. But if we're tradition-bound, we're unable to embrace the present.

Even worse, we are unable to embrace Jesus himself. The Christian faith is not essentially a tradition bound institution. At its heart, Christianity is not a set of rules or a religious structure. The Christian faith is essentially about a "now" relationship with God through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The essence of Christianity is not about the past but the present.

Of course, faith has an important component that remembers the past. We recall Christ's sacrifice on the cross, for example, by observing the Lord's Supper. But faith is only alive when it drives us to continue to live out our faith in the present, in the "now." James said, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

This begs the question, "Is my faith focused primarily on the past, or is it focused on God in the present, right now?" Are we listening so hard to our past that we can't hear God in the present? Jesus doesn't just want to get together to talk about old times and tell war stories. He wants to talk about the present, about the exciting plans He has for us in 2004. Never let the traditions we value become a substitute for a present day relationship with the living Christ, since the essence of the Christian gospel is that Jesus is alive today!

Keep the faith in 2004! **Ω**

Peter Rode can be contacted
at 5101 W. Friendly Ave.,
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Leaving Room for God

by Kent Massey

There is something about New Years and new beginnings. The New Year is a time of resolutions and fresh starts. It is also a time of surprises and opportunities. Starting a new year brings excitement with all kinds of possibilities: new jobs, new friends, new children, new relationships. Yet, it also brings some trepidation about what could be waiting around the corner. Will I keep my job? Will my kids be okay? Will my health hold out? Will my marriage make it?

One of my favorite verses is Ephesians 3:20: “Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we could ever dare to ask or hope.” I have come to understand that the power I need for the New Year (and every year) doesn’t come from me. It only comes from God. I cannot solve every problem, regardless of how hard I try—but God can. I cannot cure every hurt, no matter how much it causes me to ache—but God can. I cannot avoid every fear—but God can. I don’t have every answer to every dilemma, but I know God does. We have a God who delights in the impossible.

“But Moses told the people, ‘Don’t be afraid. Just stand where you are and watch the LORD rescue you. The Egyptians that you see today will never be seen again. The LORD himself will fight for you. You won’t have to lift a finger in your defense!” (Exodus 14:13-14). Regardless of what impossible situation you may face in this New Year (or another yet to come), God promises that when we commit our circumstances to him and trust him to do what is right (and not what we want), he will do the impossible. We must have patience as we wait on him to work and remember the words of the psalmist who said, “Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him…do not fret—it only causes harm,” (Psalm 37:7-8).

The New Year promises so much. Whatever the Lord gives us this year, let’s be thankful and entrust our total care to him. God can storm the impregnable, devise the improbable, and perform the impossible.

Matthew Henry, the great commentator, once wrote, “In times of great difficulty and great expectation, it is our wisdom to keep our spirits calm, quiet and sedate; for then we are in the best frame both to do our own work and to consider the work of God.” May God bless you this New Year and may he give you a story to tell of his faithfulness! **Ω**

Kent Massey can be contacted at kmassey@prcoc.org.

The Holy Whisper

by Jerry Senn

I read the story recently about Nate Haasis, a 17 year-old quarterback who was in the last high school game of his life. His team was far behind with only 22 seconds left. That was bad enough, but to make things worse, he was only 29 yards short of the Central State Eight conference career passing record. The opposing team was well ahead, so his chances of breaking the record were zero. However, during a timeout, the two opposing coaches consulted with one another. Together they came up with a plan to allow the young quarterback to make up the needed yards. The opposing team put up no resistance in the final seconds and Nate completed a pass that gave him the needed yards for the record. When the game ended players and fans alike celebrated the accomplishment. It was exciting and Nate enjoyed the moment.

During the night, however, he tossed and turned—his conscience would not let him sleep. His thoughts were with the boy whose record had been broken. Had that boy received help from the opposing team? Had he not worked hard to accomplish the goal? Nate thought, "I didn't break the record on my own. This isn't right." His conscience bothered him so much that he called the commissioner and had the record revoked. He had a strong desire to make the record books, but the voice within persisted and prevailed. Nate's parents were very proud, but his coach was humiliated.

> "So, when we wrestle with our conscience and lose, *we win!*"

This story renewed my confidence in athletics as a way to test and demonstrate good character. I'm sure there are other such stories we never hear about.

Someone has said, "A sanctified conscience is the holy whisper of God in the soul." The conscience is a gift from God. We call it our "moral nature," the capacity to discern good and evil, right and wrong. Conscience doesn't make the standards, but it uses what it has been taught in order to condemn or approve our thoughts, feelings and actions. While we are warned never to violate the conscience (Romans 14:23), we are also to make sure it is properly informed. Conscience is subjective (a law within), while truth is objective (a law outside itself).

I confess to closing my ears at times to the holy whisper of God. Do you? It is so easy to ignore the voice. It at first persists and is powerful, but after three or four times, the voice is silenced and our moral nature malfunctions. And, often we do what we know is right merely out of fear rather than because of the inner voice itself. Conscience is often confused with fear of the outward consequences, but one who seeks spiritual health listens to and is guided by that holy whisper of God. He alone knows true contentment and inner peace.

It is our conscience that brings us to the blood of Christ for cleansing so that we can serve God with "a sincere heart in full assurance of faith," (Hebrews 10:22). So, when we wrestle with our conscience and lose, *we win!* **Ω**

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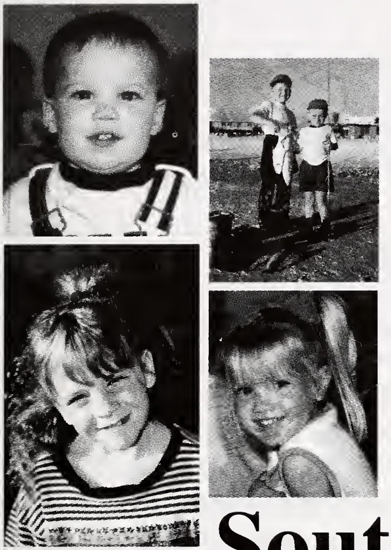

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Urgent Need!

Do What You Can!

by Jim Mullican

During the last week of his earthly life, Jesus is invited to supper at the home of a man described as "Simon the leper." The entire account is recorded in Mark 14:3-9. We are probably safe in assuming that Simon was no longer a leper at this point, but one whom Jesus had healed. Otherwise, the law of Moses would have required him to keep his distance from others and he would not be hosting a large dinner party.

In the course of the meal, Mark tells us that "a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head." Immediately some began to criticize her for wasting such expensive ointment. It could have been sold for three hundred denarii; almost a year's pay for the average working man of that time. What would that be today? Perhaps it would be something between $10,000 and $25,000—not an amount to be wasted by any of us! So perhaps we can understand the concerns expressed. Her critics pointed out that many of the poor could have been cared for with the money she could have gotten by selling the ointment. But Jesus defended the woman, saying among other things, "Leave her alone…She has done what she could."

Do what you can! This woman couldn't be an apostle. She couldn't perform miracles to heal the sick. But she could show her love for Jesus in a way that has not been forgotten after almost two thousand years (Mark 14:9).

Most of us realize that our abilities and opportunities limited. After preaching the gospel for thirty-two years, I realize that I will never be one of those preachers who are always in demand to speak at the lectureships and workshops, but that's all right. Jesus didn't call me to do that. He called me to preach and teach the Bible plainly and faithfully, and if I do that, I will have done what I can.

"…You need to focus on what you *can* do"

What about you? Perhaps you'll never be a public speaker, a great song leader, or someone invited to conduct teacher training workshops.

(continued on next page)

Pray and Pray Some More

by Mark Banks

Some say that prayer is for our heavenly Father's sake; that it brings glory to him. Others note that prayer is powerful, moving God to specific action in our world. Then there are those who claim that prayer is merely psychosomatic: it is simply for the benefit of the one who prays, for her or his spiritual, emotional and physical well-being. Still others stress that, aside from a consideration of benefits, people who know and love God simply find it natural to talk to God about everything. So, which is it? The Bible shows prayer to be all of the above.

Since God's people have such good incentive to pray, one would think that prayer is a given in their lives; that they would pray regularly and from now on. Yet, Jesus raised the specter of disciples who would be tempted to give up praying (Luke 18:1-8). Worries, problems and rampant evils can discourage God's people from praying. And then there are doubts that can distract us: "If God hears prayers, why doesn't he respond to mine? Why haven't I become the person I've prayed to be?"

So what are Christians to do when it is difficult to pray? Strangely enough, the frequent answer of Jesus and the authors of Scripture is that we should pray even when it is difficult to pray! Pray, for praying ushers us into the presence of our Father and King who loves us, and whose power and goodness fills the largest space of our minds, hearts and world.

When distracted and discouraged, pray, and pray some more. **Ω**

Mark Banks serves the Cole Mill Rd. church in Durham, NC. He can be contacted at 1617 Cole Mill Rd., Durham, NC 27705.

(Do What You Can continued)

But if so, then you need to focus on what you *can* do. Teach your children and grandchildren the Bible and lead them to Christ. Set the right example for them. Teach your children and grandchildren the Bible and lead them to Christ. Set the right example for them. Talk to your friends, relatives, neighbors and co-workers about the importance of Christianity. Invite them to study with you. Invite them to worship. Offer to pick them up and bring them. Give generously. Study diligently. Worship faithfully. Visit the sick. Help the poor. Spend time with the lonely. Comfort the hurting. Don't worry about what you can't do. *Do what you can.* **Ω**

Everything Is Not As It Seems

by Peter Rode

In the days of the old classic western movies starring the likes of Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and others, the good guys always wore white hats and the bad guys always wore black hats. Unfortunately life is not always that clear cut. A case in point is the story of Naaman, the Syrian leper, and Gehazi, the servant of God's prophet Elisha. You can read the story in 2 Kings 5.

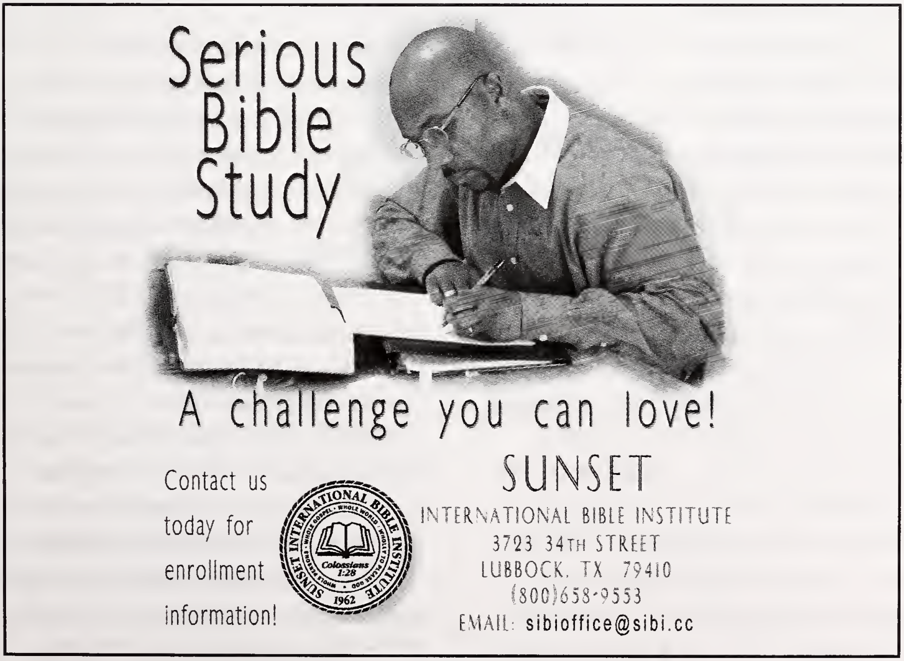
It is a story full of irony. Naaman, the leper, comes away cleansed after seven dips in the Jordan River. On the other hand, Gehazi, the Jew, is cursed. Naaman becomes a servant (v. 18), and Gehazi, the servant, becomes a leper. We are all sinners, but with the help of God through the Holy Spirit, we can overcome evil and do the right and proper thing. So, in reality, we Christians all have some good and some bad in us, and it's up to us to decide which is going to win. It's up to us to decide if we are going to walk in step with the Spirit and allow Him to lead us in the paths of righteousness, or whether we are going to allow our flesh to take the reigns of our lives and lead us down wrong paths. Paul described it this way:

We know that the Law is spiritual. But I am merely a human, and I have been sold as a slave to sin. In fact, I don't understand why I act the way I do. I don't do what I know is right. I do the things I hate. Although I don't do what I know is right, I agree that the Law is good. So I am not the one doing these evil things. The sin that lives in me is what does them. I know that my selfish desires won't let me do anything that is good. Even when I want to do right, I cannot. Instead of doing what I know is right, I do wrong. And so, if I don't do what I know is right, I am no longer the one doing these evil things. The sin that lives in me is what does them. The Law has shown me that something in me keeps me from doing what I know is right. With my whole heart I agree with the Law of God. But in every part of me I discover something fighting against my min d, and it makes me a prisoner of sin that controls everything I do. What a miserable person I am. Who will rescue me from this body that is doomed to die? Thank God! Jesus Christ will rescue me," (Romans 7:14-25, CEV).

If the story of Naaman and Gehazi had been about your life, how would you have been portrayed? Are you like Naaman with visible flaws, or do you have hidden flaws, like the greed of Gehazi? Do you listen to people who advise you and want the best for you, or are you pig-headed and obstinate and reject the advice of your mentors? Are you, like Naaman, willing to make a public confession of your faith, or do you try to stay in the shadows hiding your life of sin and lies, afraid that they might be exposed?

This is a serious matter and needs to be dealt with before things come crashing down all around you. If you are leading a life of guilt and deception, you will end up like Gehazi—cursed! But, if you are willing to be like Naaman and to be cleansed from all impurities in your life, you will be made new. The only cleansing agent that can handle our flaws is the blood of Christ.

So let us strive to walk not by the flesh, but by the Spirit. **Ω**



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Subtle Snares

by Terry Graves

We can always learn from our culture. God created the world that we live in. He has given talents and creativity and intelligence to non-believers as well as believers. Non-Christians are made in His image too. We all benefit when these gifts are used to create beauty, enhance life, and solve problems. But it is also true that our surrounding culture is fallen and can easily produce an "empty way of life" (I Peter 1:18). Society as a whole is separated from God. The world's values are often the exact opposite of God's values. "What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight" (Luke 16:15).

> "The biggest dangers in our culture may be the most subtle, so we need to be careful"

Some dangers in our culture are very obvious (blatant sexuality and crass materialism for example), but at other times, worldliness can sneak into our lives and quietly take our thoughts captive. The biggest dangers in our culture may be the most subtle, so we need to be careful. The Lord expects us to guard our hearts and minds. To be changed by renewing our minds. To take charge of our thoughts for the Lord. (Proverbs 4:20-27; Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

The apostle Paul warned, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than Christ." (Col. 2: 8). Following are three of the world's hollow philosophies that can capture our thinking.

What Works?

Americans are "can do" people. We care about results. "Whatever works," is the attitude of many people who claim to be Christians. We will choose whatever churches or religious practices work for us. (What works for us often means comfort and very little sacrifice and self-denial.) Doctrine matters little as long as we find the approach to be personally beneficial. As Paul forewarned, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires they will gather around them a number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Only God's wisdom works in the long term. "What works" is not a bad question to ask but a better question is "What is right?" or "What is true?"

What's New?

America was founded as "the New World" and has been in love with the latest thing—the newest fad—ever since, whether it's cars, computers or ideas. We often try the "what's new" approach because of a preoccupation with "what works." I am all for being fresh and contemporary in our personal lives, families, and local churches. But let us remember that the most important message in the world is 2000 years old. Scripture urges us to build our lives on "old" permanent truths and to guard the gospel that has been entrusted to us (2 Timothy 1:13-14). Instead of jumping to embrace whatever is new, we need to slow down and intentionally reflect on the lasting spiritual insights that have stood the test of time.

What's Big?

Size attracts us, leading us to confuse immensity with importance. We are impressed with numbers. I take this personally sometimes since I am a small-church minister. Small doesn't mean weak or inferior. It just means small. God works through what is big and what is little. It is true though that God has a long history of favoring the small, seemingly insignificant thing. The Bible shows Him accomplishing His work with the faithful few: the little remnants, the second-borns, the outnumbered army, the Davids instead of the Goliaths, and other "nobodies" everybody else overlooks (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). Don't forget about the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31-32). Little is much if God is in it. That includes you, me and our church. **Ω**

Terry Graves preaches for the Shelby Church of Christ. He can be contacted at gravestsa@aol.com.

Youth Matters: Coming Home

by David Kneip

One of my favorite scenes in the movie *Happy Gilmore* portrays Adam Sandler with his nose an inch off the ground, yelling at his golf ball, “Why don’t you go to your home? Are you too good for your home?” A fellow golfer had told Sandler’s character that putting was just “sending the ball home,” and when Sandler missed his putt, he let loose.

As silly as it is in the movie, the scene does actually connect with a real-life problem. If I were to ask you what is wrong with the world, and how God should fix it, you would probably give me different answers, with words like “sin” and “devil.” Some of you, though, might talk about “home” to describe the problem. “This world is not my home,” we sing; “I’m just a-passin’ through.” What we need in our lives is simply to go home. Home is heaven, right? A good place, where our heavenly Father is with our brother Jesus and our dear friend the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 5). To quote a recent song from Audio Adrenaline, it is a “big, big house with lots and lots of rooms, a big, big table with lots and lots of food, a big, big yard where we can play football.” We are not at home, and things will not be right until we are.

The book of the prophet Zephaniah was written to the nation of Israel at a time when their home was not as it should be. The people were distressed, wondering what had become of their home and how they should live in it. In answer, the prophet addressed them with words recorded in the third chapter of his book, a glorious vision of what they would one day experience at the hand of the Lord. The Lord would be with them, he would heal their lame and gather up the scattered people, he would sing over them himself. What sums all this up is in 3:20: “I will bring you home.” That is the whole picture—everything will be made right, and we prodigal children who have been welcomed home will be able to play football in the front yard.

There’s a parallel picture in another part of the Bible, one with which you’re probably more familiar. It’s the end of the book of Revelation, one of my favorite parts of the whole Scripture. John, like Zephaniah, saw a vision of what God is going to do one day for his people, and he recorded parts of it in chapters 21 and 22 of his book. There's no pain in our home, no suffering, and no funerals to attend. Good food to eat from the tree of life and a river of life-water to play in. There is no porch-light, because the Lamb is the light, and the Spirit and the bride are on the front porch, calling to us, "Come on in!"

There is no doubt that home with God is good, whether you yourself have a wonderful home life that reminds you of God or a terrible one that makes you cling to God even more closely. But, unfortunately, we are not home with God yet. Or, are we? I would say that we can be, to some extent.

Notice who is on the front porch with the Spirit in Revelation 22—the bride. The bride is a symbol used in Revelation for the church, and it makes sense to us Church of Christ folks, given our tradition of invitation, that the church calls people to come to the Lord. But how many teenagers these days listen? I know—it's a whole lot easier to enjoy youth group than "big church." There are all those people unlike you, they sing old songs you don't like, and it's just sometimes boring, right?

I want to challenge you, though, as we start this new year, to think of church in a different way. Think of church as home—the place where God makes things right in people's lives. It's not always perfect, and it's frustrating sometimes (kind of like your own home, right?), but it's where the Spirit is, calling out, "Come on in." I believe that your perspective will change a little this year, if you spend time on the porch with the Spirit rather than complaining about how the house looks, don't you?

Think about it. Be one who invites others home, not a golf ball too good for its home. **Ω**

Family Fun:

It's Not As Hard as I Thought

by A Content Mother

It's been a year since our family took a step of faith into the world of "Family Devotions." For years I wondered about, dreaded and just felt guilty about not doing this now wonderful thing. The concept was a burden and a puzzle, not a joy or a treasure. No more! Color me happy to know it is not too hard! I love the structure it gives to our week. I love that everyone looks forward to the time with anticipation and holds the memories in a special, sweet place. And I love that it takes maybe fifteen minutes each week to plan and pull together!

It all started when I read a book. Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families* demystified the idea with a simple pattern for planning, teaching, problem solving and playing. If you choose to take advantage of the FaithWeavers "Driving the Point Home" handouts, you're halfway there! Here's how it works.

Planning

Drag out ye olde calendar and make sure everyone knows what they need to know about the week's activities. Occasionally there will also be special events to plan for, such as a vacation, a birthday, a weekend trip or a holiday. We (grown-ups) plan our activities first, then copy the kid-related events onto a big calendar, sometimes with picture symbols for non-readers, and we post it (where else?) on the fridge at kid's eye level.

Teaching

This is where it really starts to get fun! Our teaching has sometimes been topical (courage, generosity, etc.), but we've had more fun reading through and acting out the most amazing Bible stories. Sharing a story or lesson together opens the door for discussions and applications throughout the week. What's not to love about the Elijah and Elisha adventures? They're incredible! We just read through the story, then go through it a second time assigning parts (sometimes three to a person). We knew we were onto something good when a child asked, "But what about Jezebel? Does the prophecy come true? What's going to happen to her?" We got to say, "Tune in next week to find out!"

Problem solving

This may be the trickiest part of the process, but we're practicing!

The ground rules are: notice is given beforehand of a problem to be discussed—possibly through a note on the kitchen table or stuck to the bathroom mirror. The person bringing the complaint is responsible for leading the family through the process of identifying the problem, brainstorming solutions, and choosing one or more to try out (Mr. Covey's book gives lots of examples and detail on this section: I recommend it). What a neat piece of family heritage to pass down—wisdom and skills for healthy relationships!

Playing

The possibilities are simply endless. A tiny starter list: making banana splits (or anything else yummy), playing Monopoly, Hi-Ho Cherry-O, Hide and Seek, relay games, going bowling, or inviting a friend or neighbor over (especially one with a special story or experience to share; maybe someone who has been on a mission trip recently). When preschoolers are involved, the more jumping and throwing the better! Anything that gets you laughing together is a great choice. Oh, here's a little secret: you don't have to do all four segments every week, but I wouldn't skip over the playing very often.

I can hardly believe it's only been a year that we've been having this kind of fun. What an amazing blessing. We look forward to it and treasure the time. It's no longer on the dreaded list of "things we really *ought* to do." Instead, it's on the list of "things we love to do."

The main question for most may be: WHEN? Where am I going to squeeze this in? That I can't help you with, but God can. Pray for a time to open up and follow His footsteps. Stake out a time on your calendar and protect it fiercely! You probably won't have much of a battle once you try it and see what a treasure Family Time is. **Ω**

A Content Mother wishes simply to share her wonderful experience with you and desires no personal attention. With regard to Family Time, as the old commercial line goes, "Try it. You might like it!"

Contagion

by Kent Massey

Like me, maybe you have watched with interest a few months ago the development of the new virus called SARS. SARS stands for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. It is a respiratory illness that has been reported in Asia, Canada, Europe and the United States. Doctors remain uncertain as to the exact cause but they have some conclusions on how it is spread—by close person-to-person contact. Over 580 deaths have been attributed to SARS throughout the world.

Doctors were unsure of the treatment for SARS because it was a new malady. This concerns health professionals throughout the world because of what they see as an increase in new diseases and the resurrection of old ones. Since the late 1970s, more than 20 serious pathogens have emerged. The new threats include an old "not so favorite" like tuberculosis (which has caused 30 million deaths worldwide since 1991).

Plagues have changed and diseases come and go but one thing remains constant—we fear contagion. Doesn't matter if terrorists steal it, grow it or spread it or if it comes from nature, pestilence plagues us all.

> "Complaining leads us to question God's faithfulness"

If there was anyone who knew about pestilence or plague, it was the ancient Israelites. Their liberation from Egyptian bondage was precipitated by a series of 10 plagues brought upon the Egyptians. The Exodus story picks up with them wandering and wondering in the wilderness and suddenly they are afflicted with a plague of a different kind—one just as contagious as SARS and even much more deadly.

"The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why put the Lord to the test? But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die or thirst?" When Moses cried out to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord answered Moses, "Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and

go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So, Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17:1-7)

The disease? The Israelites had come down with a bad case of complaining (a chronic illness for them) and it was really bothering Moses and most importantly God. They were a whining, ungrateful, disappointed and thankless people.

Their complaint seemed to settle around the issue of God's goodness. That regardless of what God had done for them and promised to do for them, God never did enough. The deliverance from bondage, the pillar of fire, the column of cloud, the parting of the Red Sea—it was not enough. They needed more.

Complaining is a plague that has been and always will be destructive and deadly to God's people. Complaints tear at the soul, they pick apart people and they peel apart communities. It is deadly because at the cellular level of our complaints is an evaluation of our relationship with God and others.

Here are some applications from this story that still ring true for us today:

Complaining "tests" God (v.2).
We are clearly warned not to put God to the test (Matthew 4:7). The warning alerts us not to insist that God meet our demands in order to prove that he is God. God doesn't play that game and we shouldn't either. When we complain we are saying that God isn't God or God would be doing things the way we want him to do things. God has only one will and it is His—not ours.

Complaining leads us to question God's faithfulness (v.7).
It is a back-handed way of saying that God is not faithful. Regardless of how many times God has proved his faithfulness, when we complain we are expressing our doubts that God is in control and that he is he with us. Complaining implies that God is a liar and capricious. It denies his very nature as faithful to those he loves.

Complaining is contagious.
This story involved not the small voices of a few but the loud raucous noise of many. It probably started with one whispering to another, "You know, that Moses is crazy. Here we are in the wilderness and no water. What are we going to do?" The disease is spread through the camp by word of mouth

and faster than a sneeze. It spreads, infects, converts and multiplies…until the community is full of illness.

Complaining glorifies the past (v.3). The Israelites look back at Egypt and they don't remember the oppression or the bricks made with no straw nor the beatings and shame. The only thing they can recall is that at least there they had water! The good old days were not always as good as complainers make them out to be. And complaining always paints the past better than what it probably was.

Complaining shifts blame (v.3). The people look at Moses and tell him this is his fault. He is a convenient scapegoat. It even leads them to consider murdering him (v.4). It causes us to look at other sources of the contagion instead of ourselves. It also leads to unreasonableness, which is another symptom of this fatal disease.

Complaining blinds us as to who the True Provider is. The people's complaint was not against God, it was against Moses. But who was going to be able to provide the water? Moses was powerless in and of himself to get the water out of the rock. When he gets to the rock, it is not him but God who provides the miracle. God assures Moses that he will be with him because the true provider is always God.

If we have a disease, we're always interested in the cure. Paul gives us a good dose of medicine when he encourages us to "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive" (Colossians 3:13). Paul is encouraging us to turn the language of complaint into the language of commitment. We should agree not to complain about our brothers and sisters, leaders or God, but instead make our commitments that express our love, forgiveness, understanding and compassion—the same things God has expressed to us.

Sometimes medicine is hard to take. Yet if we wear the name of Jesus that means that we forgive like Christ forgave, we lift up and encourage like Christ, welcome and affirm like Christ, love and forbear like Christ, suffer and endure like Christ, do acts of kindness and mercy like Christ.

SARS doesn't have a cure. Some of the world's cures to the most deadly of contagions have actually seemed to put these bad bugs on a strength and fitness program. But the disease of complaining will be healed and our souls restored by the only cure that can truly make us well where it counts—Jesus Christ. **Ω**

Families Matter:

Imparting Faith to Your Children

by Mikal Frazier

I have two new little granddaughters. One was born October 9, 2003, and the other was born December 18, 2003. The first is the third child of my son and his wife. She joined her two older brothers. The second is the first child of my daughter and her husband. These new parents are charged with the task of imparting a saving faith to their children and going about the ministry of reconciliation with these new creatures. "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation," (2 Corinthians 5:18). Parents, particularly fathers, are charged with bringing their children "up in the training (nurture) and admonition of the lord," (Ephesians 6:4).

There is no more formidable task than reconciling our children to the Father. But what is this about "preparing them for the battle?" These two precious little additions to our family along with their older cousins/siblings are born into a world that is at war. In my office I have a picture of a father who is kneeling over the bed of his sleeping child. He is in prayer. Through the window behind him a battle is raging. Depicted are two angels, one of darkness and one of light. They are at war. In Revelation 12:17, John writes "And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." John Eldredge, in Waking the Dead, writes, "War is not just one among many themes in the Bible. It is the backdrop for the whole Story, the context for everything else." He continues, "Until we come to terms with war as the context of our days, we will not understand life."

In Ephesians 5:12, Paul writes, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." We cannot impart a saving faith to our children without preparing them for the battle.

How is a parent to perform this marvelous ministry? This most important work must not, cannot, be a "Don't do as I do, but do as I say" kind of proposition. For parents to accomplish the goal of teaching a saving faith to their children, the parents must practice this kind of faith and model it for their children. Our children will see the sermon we are modeling a thousand times over the sermon that we may preach. Our children may hear our words, but they will believe and duplicate our actions.

Keeping in mind that our children will duplicate the patterns we have modeled for them, how shall we go about being that model? I am suggesting that we model ourselves after the perfect Father as he is depicted in Psalm 103. Using the traits described in Psalm 103 will result in our children replicating the behaviors and producing the fruit of the Spirit of Galatians 5:22-23.

A Homework Assignment:
How about going to your computer and printing off Psalm 103. Then as you read it, underline the traits of God as a father. God does each of these perfectly. Beside each of the traits give yourself a score on a scale from 1-100. Consider how you would know you are growing in each trait.

In the meantime begin a special prayer to be repeated often as you work through these lessons. Ask for growth in agape, wisdom and courage. These traits in a parent will lead to success in the ministry of reconciliation. **Ω**

This article originally appeared in the January 15, 2004 issue of All About Families, an online newsletter, and is used with permission. You can subscribe to this excellent resource by sending a message to aaf@allaboutfamilies.org with the Subject line SUBSCRIBE FAMILY. Mikal Frazier can be contacted at mikal@allaboutfamilies.org.

The Crowded Heart

by Jerry Senn

In Jesus' parable of the soils we learn a great deal about ourselves. He identified three types of heart conditions with which most of us can relate. I want to focus on the one type I feel will affect modern believers most profoundly in 2004.

Jesus talked about hearts that are too crowded to produce: "The ones on whom the seed was sown among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard the word, and the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for others things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful," (Matthew 13:22).

In discussing the seed of truth, which is meant to yield positive results when received and nurtured, Jesus said some hearts are just too busy with worries, riches and desires, so the good which might have come forth is choked. Lord, is it me?

Alexander McLaren said about Jesus' words, "There are two crops fighting for the upper hand on the one ground…No heart can mature two crops. We must choose between God and mammon—between the word and the world." And just so, the words of God are choked to death because our hearts are wrapped around the affairs of this world. Our hearts are materialistic, busy with many things, even good things. Eternal matters may become merely items on our to-do list, but are crowded to the end of the list, as if worry, money and personal satisfaction were more vital. Crowded hearts cannot honor God with growth.

This type of heart isn't shallow or unable to put down roots. The trouble is not that we don't want the life of the Lord to work within us, because we do. The problem is that we want it all, God and mammon, at once.

The "thorns" Jesus lists are so relevant for us. *Worry* chokes out spiritual growth by crowding out trust in God. We can't worry and trust at the same time. Someone said, "Worrying is praying to the wrong God." Next, the truth can't produce if we fall for Satan's lies about *riches.* When we allow ourselves to believe that money will meet our deepest needs, spiritual growth is impossible. And, as we allow our *desire for pleasure* to overshadow our longing for invisible realities which can nurture our spiritual nature, the power of truth is crowded out.

Jeremiah said, "Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among the thorns…circumcise your hearts," (Jeremiah 4:3-4). And David adds, "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place…Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me," (Psalm 51:6, 10).

May this year be for us all a year when the truth of God produces abundant fruit in our lives. **Ω**

Is the Message Flowing?

by Lindsey Garmon

Somewhere, sometime, somebody shared the "Good News" of what Jesus did for you at the cross and the tomb! Who was that person? How did that process occur for you? How grateful we are that someone helped us to become connected with the power of the gospel!

Obviously, in that communication process the good news message was flowing from one person to another person. Question: Is that message still flowing today? It flowed *into* your heart. Is it flowing *out* of your life? Or is there a clog in the system? The key is to keep the flow…flowing. What we're referring to is outreach and evangelism. You and I have been rescued—saved, secured, loved by Jesus. We have been forgiven and declared "not guilty" before God! The message has flowed freely into our lives and we are not the same. And now, we must find ways to release that life-changing message and allow it to impact the lives of others. We must not withhold it!

Here are a few suggestions based on Colossians 4:2-6:

1. **Open your eyes when you pray (v. 2).** Paul said, "Be watchful as you pray." Jesus said, "Open your eyes and look at the fields! The are ripe for harvest." By keeping our eyes open we will see the people around us who need to hear the message.
2. **Pray for opportunities (v. 3).** Paul asked the Colossians to "pray for God to open a door for the message." An "open door" meant "opportunity." We must look for opportunities and see the people around us who are without hope. We must be bold and take the risk; we must speak up and allow the message to flow
3. **Pray for others who have opportunities (v. 4).** Paul also asked the Colossians to pray for him as he attempted to clearly proclaim the message. Are we conscious of the need to give each other prayer support? That's what Paul was asking for. Let's be "fellow-workers." I will pray for you and you pray for me. We need each other!
4. **Reach out to those on the outside (v. 5).** Paul wrote, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity." We must take advantage of every open door, building relationships and establishing trust in order for people to receive our message.
5. **Know how to answer (v. 6).** Paul made it clear that "our conversation must be full of grace and seasoned with salt so that we will know how to answer everyone." The good news must be declared. It is not enough to be "good guys" in the neighborhood. We must *share* the message. The power is in the gospel.

Let's make sure we keep the flow flowing! **Ω**

Lindsey Garmon can be contacted at 700 Brooks Ave., Raleigh, NC 27607

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Lessons from Nature

by Ron Newberry

One of the most powerful ways to learn is to be an observer. Having keen powers of observation will teach you lessons you cannot glean from textbooks, lectures or discussions. As an observer of both nature and human nature, I've learned some connections between the two.

While taking a stroll in the park this past summer, I noticed a hummingbird. What grace and ease of flight is exhibited as it flittered from flower to flower searching for nectar. I was amazed at its agility and it's relentless pursuit of the sweet liquid in the blooms.

That same sunny afternoon I gazed up at a vulture soaring overhead. He glided over the treetops and the grass searching for something dead and rotting, the corpse of some dead animal. He sailed over the flowers the hummingbird had feasted on in a relentless search of a carcass. Vultures, you see, only see rotting meat. Why? That is what they are looking for. They thrive on that diet. No sweet nectar for them—they want only rotting flesh. Hummingbirds, on the other hand, ignore the stench of dead animals. Instead, they look for the vivid blossoms of plants. They will pass a dozen examples of carrion to dart in and out of blossoms.

The vultures live on what used to be. They fill themselves with what is dead and gone. They long for what no longer lives. But hummingbirds live on what is. They seek life. They give themselves to freshness and vitality. My observation is a simple one. Each bird finds what it is looking for. What is my connection of nature to human nature? We all find what we are looking for.

To the person seeking a great country, marvelous community or exceptional church, he or she finds it. The person seeking to find a corrupt country, appalling community or inferior church, he or she likewise finds it. This is not to suggest that something is good or bad, holy or evil, wonderful or disgusting based solely on one's observations. I merely suggest that one can find beauty and strength even when disgusting things are present.

Likewise, one can discover odious things in the midst of beauty. To a large degree what we see, perceive or comprehend depends on what we are looking for in the first place.
Perhaps if all you see are the negative aspects of the nation, the community and the church, you might want to check your "attitude feathers" and see what kind of spiritual bird you are. Are you a buzzard or a hummingbird? The marvelous thing about the spiritual aspect of a metaphor is this: buzzards can be transformed by the power of God into hummingbirds.

Oh, pardon me please! I think I see a flower that needs my attention. **Ω**

[brotherhood news]

Rock Hill, SC... The *Charlotte Ave. Church of Christ* will be hosting the sixth annual *Carolina Men's Fellowship* on Saturday, March 13 from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. This year's theme is "A Way That is Right and Cannot Be Wrong." For more information you can call the church office at (803) 327-7853.

Sanford, NC... The *Sanford Church of Christ* will be hosting a Ladies Day on April 24. The theme will be "Bloom Where You're Planted." For more information contact *Stephanie Ransom* by phone at (919) 718-4961, or by e-mail at *sransom@aocweb.com.*

Winston-Salem, NC... The *South Fork Church of Christ* will be hosting its annual youth rally March 19-21. The theme is "Communicating With God." Among the speakers will be *Chuck Taylor, Kirk Sams, Brian Sheppard* and *Phil Stapp.*

Yadkinville, NC... The *Yadkinville Church of Christ* celebrated its 25th anniversary and homecoming on January 18 with a near record 107 in attendance. A special afternoon service focused on the theme "A Work in Progress."

Abilene, TX... The annual Abilene Christian University Bible Lectureship, February 22-25, featured a meeting between leaders of the International Church of Christ and leaders representing the "mainline" churches of Christ. Lectureship director Mark Love commented, "While division loves silence, peace cherishes conversation." The event, billed as "Faithful Conversations," included participants Al Baird, Mike Taliaferro, Gregg Marutzky and Gordon Ferguson of the ICOC and Jack Reese, Jim Woodroof and John Wilson of the "mainline" churches. The International Churches of Christ, formerly known as the Boston and Crossroads movements, underwent a major transition with the resignation of longtime leader Kip McKean in late 2002. Since then, the ICOC has undergone a period of change and reassessment. (Reported in the *Christian Chronicle*, December 16, 2003).

[trends of interest]

Divorces Down
1980—22.6 per 1,000
2001—17.8 per 1,000
(*American Demographics,* Nov. 2003)

Small Churches and Busters
Christian pollster and researcher George Barna reports that the smaller church may be the church of choice for many adults under the age of 35. Those of the Baby Boomer generation like larger churches (one-fourth attend churches of 500 or more), but those of the younger generation seem to have a greater desire for a sense of strong community (only one-sixth attend churches of 500 or more). About 60 percent of U. S. churches have a Sunday attendance of 100 or less. *(barna.org)*

Only Half of American Senior Ministers Hold to Biblical Worldview
According to a recent study by the Barna Group, only half of the Senior Ministers in U.S. churches hold to a biblical worldview (the accuracy of biblical teaching, the sinless nature of Jesus, the literal existence of Satan, the omnipotence and omniscience of God, salvation by grace and the personal responsibility to evangelize). A poll of 601 senior ministers randomly selected from 50 denominations found that 49 percent did not hold to a biblical worldview. The denomination with the highest number of senior ministers holding to the historic tenets of Christian faith was the Southern Baptists with 71 percent. The denomination with the lowest number was the United Methodist Church with 27 percent. Surprisingly, preachers younger than 40 (56 percent) were more likely to hold to a biblical worldview than those 40 and older (50 percent).
(*churchcentral.com*, Jan. 19, 2004)

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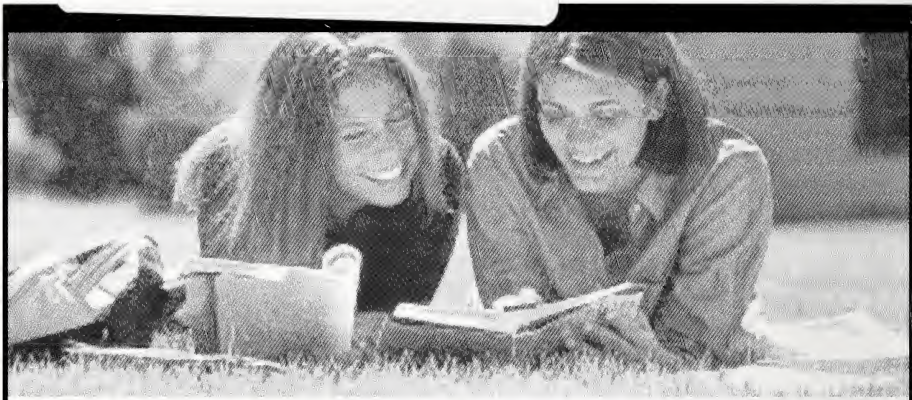

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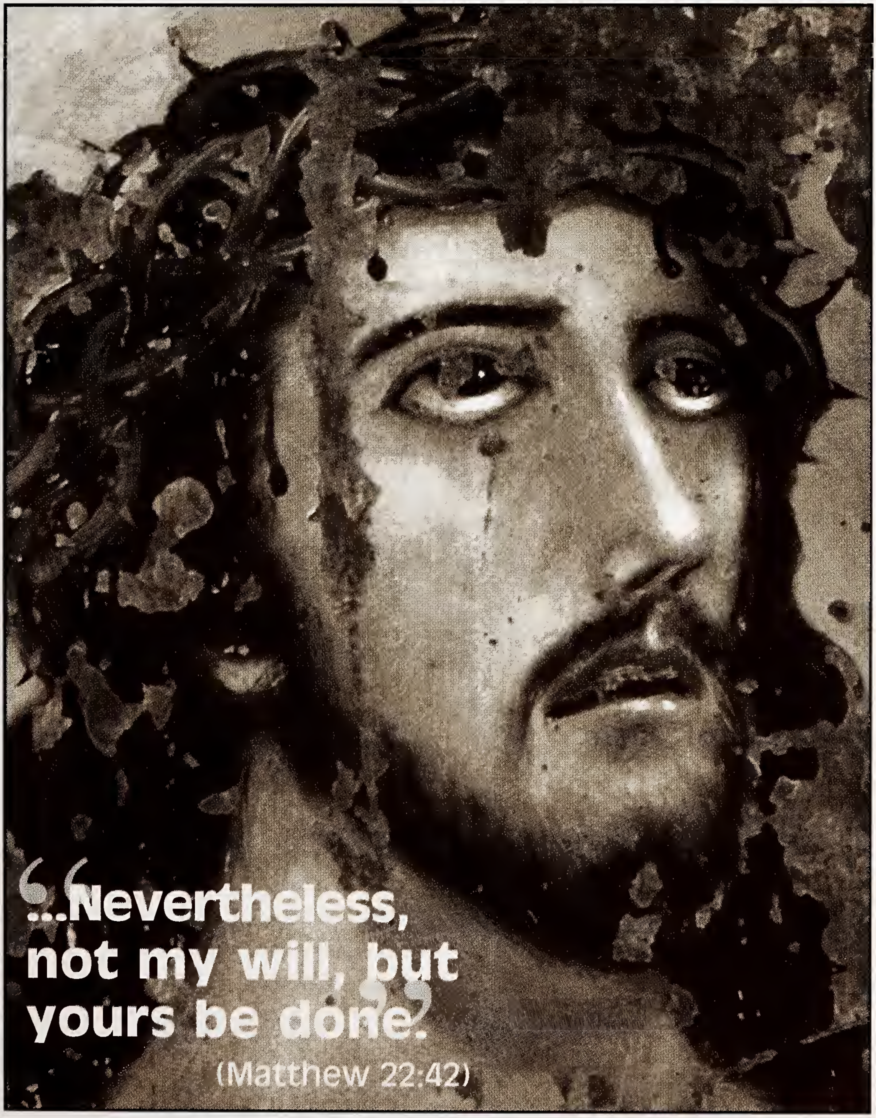

"...Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done."

(Matthew 22:42)

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Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
Catherine Thacker, Design Editor

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Offensive Churches

by Dennis Conner

Driving along I-40 on the way to Raleigh recently, I noticed an interesting change in the interstate landscape. Somewhere around Burlington there is a huge billboard situated next to the road that rises above the pavement and assaults your line of vision. Well, it assaults and insults. It's a billboard advertising a "gentleman's" club called Dockside Dolls. For years it has held sway on it's plot of asphalt real estate, appealing mightily to the "lust of the eyes."

On this day, however, something was different, radically different. Across the parking lot from the strip club stands a building that once housed some other kind of business that apparently didn't do enough business. Now, the building serves as the meeting place for a church! That's right, a church moved in across the way from the strip club. I couldn't help but smile at the irony and admire the undaunted courage of this group of folks.

> "We are called to engagement, not withdrawal"

How often have we heard of strip clubs and pornography shops moving into otherwise respectable neighborhoods, offending the moral sensibilities of the locals? Moral outrage soon expresses itself in petitions circulated throughout the community and raised voices at commissioner meetings. In this case, however, the tables were turned. A church had invaded the turf of the purveyors of flesh! They knew full well what they were doing. They knew what was situated across the parking lot, a world away. And they apparently believed that it was time to take some turf away from Satan for a change. What courage! What moxy! What a statement! Even more, what faith.

And it's about time. It's about time that churches were more offensive. It's about time that someone uncircled the wagons and went on the move. It's about time that we adopted Jesus' strategy of engagement. Instead of entrenching himself and trying to fight off the devil, Jesus was always on the move entering the turf of the enemy and engaging him. Outside the tomb of his dear friend Lazarus, Jesus stepped boldly on death's turf and shared with the world something of his resurrection power. He met the demon-possessed head on, and the demons cowered in his presence. Jesus was always going to where the people were, healing their diseases and bringing the gospel of the kingdom within their reach. Defense was not the strategy of the Savior. He was an offensive Lord.

The church is called to go into the world and make a difference, not retreat from the world and then expend our energy protecting the status quo. We are called to engagement, not withdrawal. Our fight is with the enemy and not with each other in the body of Christ.

I don't really know anything about the church across from Dockside Dolls, except that their actions speak volumes. May God increase our faith so that we may move from entrenchment to engagement, from defense to offense. The best offense is a good defense may be a truism in sports, but not in spiritual warfare. **Ω**

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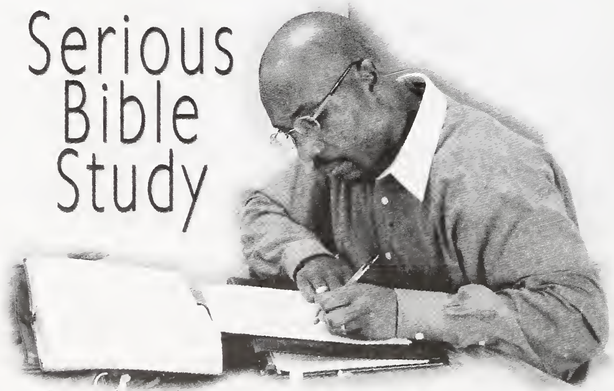

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The Ant *and the Contact Lens*

by Ron Newberry

Ever vigilant for great illustrations I especially enjoy those that are purported to be “true stories.” Sometimes it is possible to verify their veracity and sometimes it’s not. However, modern stories can serve as great parables whether they are true or not. Such is the case with a story that circulated two or three years ago on the Internet about an ant and a contact lens.

> **“Whatever God tells us to do he empowers us to do”**

Brenda was a young woman who was invited to go rock climbing. Although she was scared to death, she went with her group to a tremendous granite cliff. In spite of her fear, she put on the gear, took hold of the rope, and started up the face of that rock. Well, she got to a ledge where she could take a breather. As she was hanging on there, the safety rope snapped against Brenda’s eye and knocked out her contact lens. Well, here she is on a rock ledge, with hundreds of feet below her and hundreds of feet above her. Of course, she looked and looked and looked, hoping it had landed on the ledge, but it just wasn’t there.

Here she was, far from home, her sight now blurry. She was desperate and began to get upset, so she prayed to the Lord to help her to find it. When she got to the top, a friend examined her eye and her clothing for the lens, but there was no contact lens to be found. She sat down, despondent, with the rest of the party, waiting for the rest of them to make it up the face of the cliff. She looked out across range after range of mountains, thinking of that Bible verse that says, “The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth.” She thought, “Lord, You can see all these mountains. You know every stone and leaf, and You know exactly where my contact lens is. Please help me.”

Finally, they walked down the trail to the bottom. At the bottom there was a new party of climbers just starting up the face of the cliff. One of them shouted out, “Hey, you guys! Anybody lose a contact lens?” Well, that would be startling enough, but you know why the climber saw it? An ant was moving slowly across the face of the rock, carrying it. Brenda’s father is a cartoonist. When she told him the incredible story of the ant, the prayer, and the contact lens, he drew a picture of an ant lugging that contact lens with the words, “Lord, I don’t know why You want me to carry this thing. I can’t eat it, and it’s awfully heavy. But if this is what You want me to do, I’ll carry it for You.”

Let me assure you that I am not a fatalist. However, it might be good for us to pause occasionally and to say to God, “Lord, I don’t have a clue why you asked me to carry this burden. I can’t really see anything productive coming from this struggle. And Lord it’s getting awfully heavy. But, if you want me to carry it, I’ll carry it and leave it up to you to make sense out of the struggle.”

We all are unworthy but God makes us worthy thorough the work of His Son. We are all inadequate but God makes us adequate through the work of the Holy Spirit. Whatever God calls us to do he empowers us to do. Sometimes we just have to carry what we perceive to be a burden until we intersect with God’s will and understand that God had been preparing a solution to our dilemma before we even knew we had a problem.

Thank you God for being the sovereign Lord of the universe. Thank you for offering to be our Savior. Thank you for bearing fruit in our lives. Thank you for giving us “contact lenses” to carry even when we cannot make sense of the burden. Thank you for your perfect timing when your plans and our burdens intersect and you allow us to understand. Amen! **Ω**

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Staff Changes at *Carolina Christian*

We would like to welcome *Catherine Thacker* to the staff of ***Carolina Christian***! Catherine is our new design editor, having begun with the January/February issue. Catherine recently graduated from Clemson University in South Carolina with a degree in Graphic Communications. She has settled in Atlanta, Georgia, where she works for a commercial printer as an Account Executive. Her parents currently reside in Wisconsin. And, in a blatant display of unbridled nepotism, Catherine's uncle happens to be the editor of ***Carolina Christian***!

Catherine succeeds *Peyton Crump*, who served as our Design Editor for two years before having to give up ministry due to the growing demands of family and work. Peyton is an extremely talented young man who seeks for ways to use his talents for the glory of God. We deeply appreciate his contributions the past two years and pray that God will continue to open doors for Peyton to use his artistic talents to promote the gospel of Christ.

None of us at ***Carolina Christian*** receive any salary for our work; it is strictly a labor of love. Consequently, we appreciate all the more the efforts of young people like Catherine and Peyton and their willingness to share their talents with us.

Passionate Responses

The release of Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ" has proved to be nothing short of a phenomenon. Steadily climbing the list of all time top-grossing movies in domestic history, the movie has struck a nerve with moviegoers. It is not the kind of movie of which you ask someone, "Did you like the movie." As several have suggested, it is really more of an experience than a movie. Despite the controversies that have enveloped the movie, it has been a powerful tool in initiating dialogue between Christians and non-Christians and has motivated people to seek answers to their questions about Jesus with renewed vigor. People leave the theater in a far more reflective mood than when they entered. Many report that they have been changed by the movie.

You will notice that many of the articles in this issue of Carolina Christian are a testimony to the effect of the movie. Some of the articles were submitted to us, while others were gleaned from church bulletins, but all share one thing in common: the profound truth and impact of the passion and death of our Lord.

It was not intentional that this issue should take on a "Passion" theme, but it has nevertheless. In the end, it was not Mel Gibson's movie making skills that made the movie such a success. Rather, it was the power and pathos of the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. The story of Jesus is simply the greatest story ever told. May his story, the theme of these articles, bless you again and again. **Ω**

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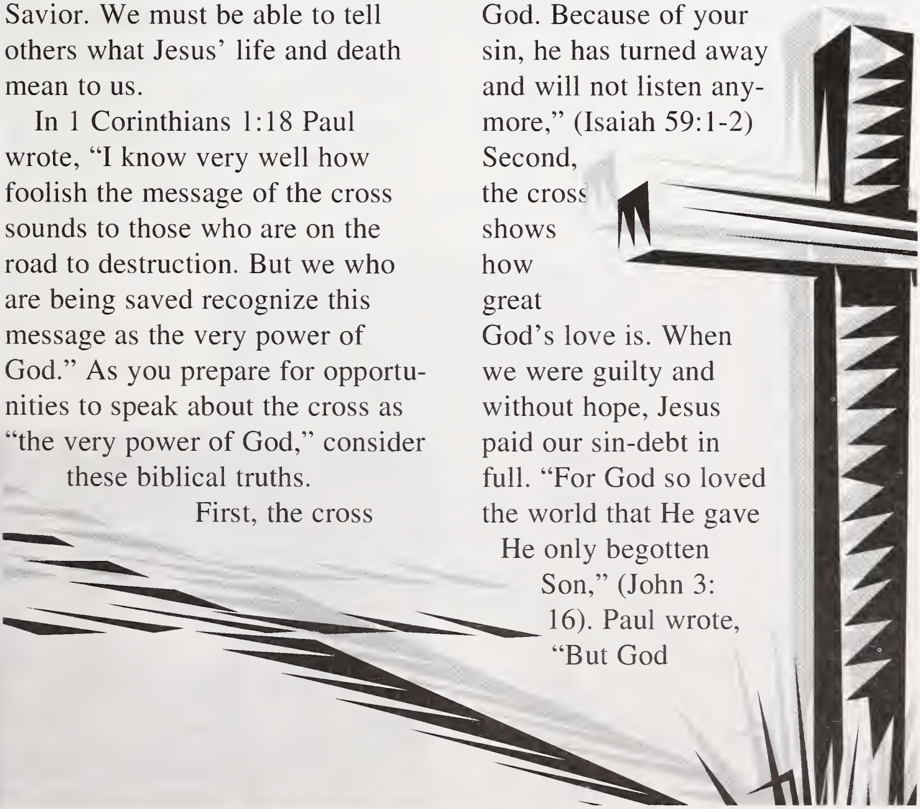
The Message of the Cross

by Lindsey Garmon

In recent weeks the eyes of the American public have been riveted on the death of Jesus. The showing of the film The Passion of Christ has stirred an interest in the events surrounding Christ's crucifixion that is unprecedented. As interest in Jesus is stirred and questions about his life and mission are raised, we must be prepared to speak lovingly and convincingly about our Lord and Savior. We must be able to tell others what Jesus' life and death mean to us.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul wrote, "I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize this message as the very power of God." As you prepare for opportunities to speak about the cross as "the very power of God," consider these biblical truths.

First, the cross reminds us of the enormity of sin. Are you grieved by the fact that many with whom you rub shoulders daily are separated from God because of the power of sin? Sin causes a breach in fellowship with God. The prophet Isaiah said, "Listen! The Lord is not too weak to save you, and he is not becoming deaf. He can hear you when you call. But there is a problem—your sins have cut you off from God. Because of your sin, he has turned away and will not listen anymore," (Isaiah 59:1-2) Second, the cross shows how great God's love is. When we were guilty and without hope, Jesus paid our sin-debt in full. "For God so loved the world that He gave He only begotten Son," (John 3:16). Paul wrote, "But God



> "We serve a God who cared enough to get personally involved"

showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners," (Romans 5: 8).

Third, the cross shows how involved God is in helping us to deal with the predicament of our sin. We serve a God who cared enough to get personally involved. The Creator God came to this earth to rescue us from sin! "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and he will be called Immanuel, meaning, "God is with us," (Matthew 1:23).

Fourth, the cross shows the only way out of bondage to sin. Paul expressed it this way, "All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to Himself through what Christ did…For God was in Christ, reconciling world to Himself. For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ," (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

And Jesus said, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all men unto Me." **Ω**

Lindsey Garmon can be contacted at 700 Brooks, Ave., Raleigh, NC 27607; or by e-mail at lindsey@brooks.org.

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An Afternoon at the Movies

by Regina Scmitt

This afternoon two friends and I go to see Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." I go in knowing the violence has been displayed for all mankind's sin, but cannot in my limited imagination conjure up what Mel Gibson is able to do in his two-hour vision of the last twelve hours of Christ's life. It's hard for me to imagine the scene now in it's full running time of twelve hours.

I get our popcorn and Coke as one usually does, casually entering into a room that will forever alter the way I partake of the bread and the wine. I take my seat not yet prepared for the sacrifice of body and blood which I am about to witness. Nor am I prepared for the sacrifice I watched in the eyes of Mary. She had pondered many things in her heart that now is about to be broken into tiny pieces like fine crystal that has been shattered as she watches the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

The movie opens in the darkness of the night with Jesus praying in the garden while Satan prowls around like a lion waiting to devour his prey. Christ enters into the darkness of our hearts much in the same way, while Satan prowls around waiting to devour us.

Then He is arrested and continually beaten and flogged. I never really had a visual of flogging before today. The hunger the crowd has for the life of this simple carpenter cannot be satisfied with anything less than crucifixion. The payment of our sins cannot be satisfied once and for all without the blood of the perfect Lamb. And blood is shed, spurted, spilled, splashed, and sprayed. They beat Jesus until he falls to the ground. As his accusers and floggers start to walk away thinking he has endured all he possibly can, Jesus pulls himself up to take the lash of another sin, the whip of another transgression. My mind begins to consider if that is my iniquity for which He had to drag himself back up.

> “No words are spoken. The blood has said it all.”

As they drag away his beaten body, he leaves a trail of blood. Mary begins to wipe the spilled blood of her son, as she would have sopped up a mess He may have made as a toddler.

He is brutally beaten, spit upon, mocked, and kicked by His creation. He has seen them in the womb. He fearfully and wonderfully made each man that tears His body. They place the crown of thorns deep into the flesh that covers his head. Blood streams down his face into His eyes. That, I suppose, is how God sees us now. His eyes look through the blood of Jesus seeing us purified.

As Jesus is led to be crucified I can see the weight of the cross. The heaviness of the trespasses of generations being carried though the city up the hill to be nailed for all eternity is beautifully and realistically displayed. His mother is never far from sight. And neither is Satan. Mary follows with a look of belief in her eyes that does not shine through anyone else. He is hers. A Savior to the world. A Savior even to His mother.

The thud of the hammer hitting the nail on the head as they fasten each hand then his feet to the cross leaves my heart pounding. Waves of nausea roll over me making me feel lightheaded.

He withstands the cross for what seems like an eternity. Mary walks over to the cross as the sky darkens. She kisses the feet of her beloved son, getting blood on her lips and face. Does she remember the feel of his baby feet? Could she smell them after a long journey when his sandals were removed? She wipes the blood off the feet of the Master who washed the feet of his disciples.

He finally calls out to His Father and commends His spirit. The soldiers spear his side baptizing the bystanders in a sea of blood and water. His body is taken down from the cross. Mary holds her baby, her creator, and her flesh in her hands. The cinematographer moves my eyes to the blood-drenched crown and three nails lying on the ground. Oh Death where is your sting? The picture of sacrifice. The picture of forgiven sin. The picture of Victory. The movie screen goes completely blank slowly giving way to light like the sun rising the morning after a thunderstorm. The room is soundless. As each of us mere mortals try to process the story we've all heard a thousand times, but has now been cut deeper into our souls, our eyes behold the rising of a healed body with nail holed hands. A temple completely rebuilt.

The screen goes black.

No one moves for a minute or so. Cautiously, deliberately, people begin to move about. I am still motionless. The three of us sit. No words are spoken. The blood has said it all.

I then notice the woman sitting beside one of my friends. She is in great praise to Jesus unencumbered by her surroundings. I eavesdrop on a sacred moment. She lifts her hand in complete adoration. I feel I am on holy ground. None of us move while she is in sweet communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I feel an unusual urge to grab her hands as she lifts them in praise, as if the two of us together might be able to touch the hem of His garment. I sat blessed by her love and her awe and her total undistracted heart to God.

I will continue to ponder and digest the event that changed all of history. I will pray for a hunger that is satisfied with nothing less than the bread of life and a thirst that is only quenched by righteousness. **Ω**

Regina Scmitt worships with the Central church in Spartanburg, SC.

The Passion *of the Christ*

by Jerry Senn

Mel Gibson`s movie has been in the theaters for several weeks now, and millions of believers and unbelievers alike have been experiencing scenes that are both shocking and sobering to minds and hearts. While most reviews and reports of the movie are very positive, there have been objections and critics.

Objections are always raised when truth is presented. Satan delights when he can conceal and distort the power of God's love and dull the impact of that love as demonstrated in Christ's sacrifice. Hopefully the film will have a powerful impact on our society and it will cause unbelievers to seek after the salvation provided in God's one and only Son, Jesus. He is the answer to humanity`s greatest needs: forgiveness and acceptance. Only through a relationship with him can we find peace of mind, purpose for living, and hope for the future.

Jesus' death by crucifixion is a display of man's hardness and rebellion, and it's awful pain and agony cannot be adequately described in words or even pictures. Nevertheless, all our efforts to make the experience of the cross vivid and real to our hearts are well worth our time and energy. This is a story, which is at the very heart of our faith and must impact our lives every day. Regrettably, too often our faith rests in our "religious traditions" more than in our Savior's loving sacrifice.

Once aspect of our Lord's death is often neglected and is more significant than the physical aspects of His crucifixion. We often fail to understand that on the cross Jesus suffered spiritual separation from his Father. He became "sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God," (2 Corinthians 5:21). Our sins deserve spiritual death, or separation from God. However, he took upon himself the separation we all deserve (Isaiah 59:2; 53:6). Therefore, our Savior's spiritual separation must surely have exceeded even the physical torment and agony of the cross.

Let us seek to make the death of Jesus the very centerpiece of our personal lives. As Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me," (Galatians 2:20).

The words of hymn writer Augustus M. Toplady should become our own: "Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling." Ω

A Tragedy

by Kent Massey

I saw a tragedy recently, but it is one I hope to see next Sunday. I'd rather see the tragedy I saw than the one that I fear will eventually happen.

The tragedy involves a boy named Billy (the name has been changed to protect the innocent). Billy is a young boy in his early to mid teens. He comes to worship almost every Sunday and on most Wednesday evenings. He comes by himself. Sometimes he hitches a ride with a friend, but usually a family member drops him off. What's the tragedy? Just that. Someone in Billy's family drops him off to go in by himself. His mom and dad have something "more important" to do during Sunday School and Wednesday evening. So, Billy goes to church, something that would give him spiritual direction, all alone.

I have no idea how long Billy will get himself to church. I pray he will find the inner strength to keep the habit going. One day, though, Billy might find it easier to sleep in. Or his family will make plans that will cause Billy to miss church, and that will be followed by another Sunday with more plans, and then another and another. From his family Billy gets the message loud and clear that they have "more important things" than church.

Billy isn't a poor kid. His family isn't rich, but they are comfortable. They just don't care about spiritual things.

And that is the second scene of this tragedy. Billy's family gives him everything he needs and desires, except what he needs most. I hope Billy keeps attending church, but over the long haul the chances are slim. It's hard to be a young person for Jesus in a culture that is so ungodly and sinful. But, there is hope. If in the next few years Billy doesn't make it and turns out wrong, don't be too rough on him, because as a young teen he really tried.

Billy isn't your child, is he? **Ω**

How Do I Do Today?

by Cindy Cox

saw "The Passion of the Christ" yesterday. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I had been concerned about the Biblical accuracy and purported violence. The conflicting publicity made it hard to know what to expect. I went to the movie with a group of church family. Within just a few minutes of the start of the film, I realized I had come to the movie with them, but I wasn't watching the movie with them. I became unaware of others in the theater as I focused on the film. The brutality that our Lord suffered for us became the brutality my Lord suffered for me. The hell He endured and the defeat of Satan was for me.

The movie's brutality was not so prominent in my mind as I woke up this morning. The love, forgiveness and peace are what I remembered. I sat on the edge of my bed asking, "How do I do today?" It has to be different, but, how? It's not that the movie gives me more than the Bible. It can't possibly come close. But, it gives me the opportunity to witness what the first century people witnessed. And I have to react in some way. They did.

The violence in the movie was different than typical modern media. We are a fairly sanitized culture when it comes to execution or even imprisonment. Some of the first Christians would have witnessed this. And it's not just the violence. It's that Jesus did this for me. He became my sin, and—or however long—it was hell for Him. And God, through Christ's suffering, gave those people a way out. Through His stripes we also are healed. So, I keep asking myself, "How do I do today?" And I don't have any clear-cut answers. So many things are swirling in my mind. They will settle out with God's help. And then I have to deal with them.

A thought just occurred to me—in the movie Mary, Jesus' mother, woke up and asked "Why is tonight any different from any other night?" Magdalene answered, "Because we are free, we are no longer slaves." That was from the Passover, the first one. And repeated every year since, even to today. But for Mary and the others, it was even more important. Jesus was giving them freedom even from the law they were living. The timing was perfected in the Passover and the Passover Lamb.

I asked Mary's question in different words: "How is today different from any other day?" and "How do I do today?" Things have to be different. I must choose to be different. That difference depends on if I ask God or Satan for help. So, I ask God. It is a bit scary. I will have to step out of my comfort zone. And I can rejoice because I will not be alone. God is always with me.

So, how did you wake this morning? Why is today any different than any other day? **Ω**

Cindy Cox worships with the Aiken church of Christ in Aiken, SC. She can be contacted at ccoxaa@bellsouth.net

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Father, Forgive Them

by Johnny Melton

Elizabeth I, Queen of England, died in 1603. She is reputed to have said to the Countess of Nottingham, "God may forgive you, but I never can." What a striking contrast to the words of Jesus recorded in Luke 23:34, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing."

The original text suggests that this statement was continually repeated by Jesus during his crucifixion. As they laid him on the cross he said, "Father forgive them." As they nailed his hands and his feet to that cross, he may have prayed again, "Father forgive them." When they lifted the cross and let if fall into place our Lord prayed, "Father forgive them." And as he hung suspended between heaven and earth he was repeatedly praying, "Father forgive them."

Jesus could have prayed many things. He could have commanded a legion of angels to come and rescue him, but he didn't. Jesus died as he had lived, in the habit of prayer. How fitting, then, that the first words to pass his lips as he was crucified were words of prayer. In fact, three times from the cross Jesus would pray. His first words, "Father forgive them," and the final statement on the cross, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," are addressed to the *Father*. The fourth word from the cross was, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" So, as Jesus *entered* his suffering, he prayed; as he *endured* his suffering, he prayed; and as he *emerged* from his suffering, he prayed.

As we think of this short but profound prayer, "Father forgive them," our attention is drawn first to the one Jesus addressed—his Father. Folks will sometimes confess, "I just can't talk to God anymore after all that I've been through. I can't pray anymore. There's nothing left. If God really cared, he would not have let me suffer so much."

But look at Jesus. Hated for doing good. Beaten for telling the truth. Deserted by his closest friends and allowed to suffer by his Heavenly Father. See the rude spittle on his face and the crown of thorns thrust into his brow. Witness his body wracked with agony. Who among us has experienced the pain, the emotional hurt, the disappointment, and (more importantly) the spiritual agony Jesus endured? And yet he could still pray, "Father…"

Jesus' faith remained strong despite the incomprehensible depths of his personal crisis. When we find ourselves in the depths of despair, let us not turn from God, but to him. Let us continue to call on him in prayer. He does see. He does care. He blesses.

Second, we notice his appeal, "Forgive." The word " forgive" means to remit, to dismiss, to send away. As Jesus was executed for crimes he did not commit, his heart was free of malice and ill will. He did not call out for justice or righteous retribution. Rather, he pled for mercy.

In his death Jesus practiced the message he had daily taught as he lived. In Matthew 4:4 he preached, "But I say unto you love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you." In the model prayer Jesus taught his followers to pray, "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," (Matthew 6:12). He then offered this commentary: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Peter Miller, a preacher in Pennsylvania, lived during the Revolutionary War. Everyone loved Miller, except for one man. This man was later accused and convicted of treason and sentenced to die. Peter Miller walked 60 miles to meet George Washington and begged the great general to pardon the man. Washington said, "I'm sorry that I cannot grant your request for your friend." "Friend!" exclaimed Miller, "Why, the man is the worst enemy I have in the world." Washington was stunned. He said, "You have walked 60 miles to save the life of an enemy? That, in my judgment, puts the matter in a different light. I will grant the pardon for your sake."

Miller, with pardon in hand, walked another 15 miles to the site of the execution. The condemned man saw Miller approaching and remarked, "There is Peter Miller. He has walked all the way from Ephrata to have his revenge gratified by seeing me hung." But Miller pushed his way through the crowd and handed the condemned man the pardon that saved his life.

Peter Miller had learned the spirit of Christ.

Jesus prayed, "Forgive them." He forgave his enemies, his detractors,

"Have we learned the spirit of Christ?"

those who were killing him. He prayed for them, and we dare do no less.

When was Jesus' prayer answered? I suggest that Jesus manifested a willingness to forgive; a spirit of forgiveness. As far as God was concerned the blot of sin remained on the souls of the offenders until they turned to God and were cleansed by the precious blood of Jesus. It is significant that the very thing the enemies of Jesus did on that day was the thing that made their ultimate salvation possible.

What about us? Have we learned the spirit of Christ? **Ω**

Johnny Melton is a former editor of Carolina Christian and preaches in Washington, IN. He can be contacted at johnnymelton@hotmail.com.

Two Great Soldiers Go Home

The kingdom of God on earth has lost two great servants recently, J. M. Powell and J. D. Thomas. Both have made inestimable contributions to the cause of Christ and will be greatly missed.

Brother James Marvin (J.M.) Powell, noted preacher, teacher, author and Restoration Movement historian, went home to be with his Lord on Sunday, January 25 at the age of 96. Powell served churches in Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia. He was a faculty member at Ohio Valley College and later served as President of OVC. For 32 years brother Powell worked with the Blue Ridge Encampment in Black Mountain, NC, serving as its Director for 25 years. He is survived by his wife of 67 years, Mildred Cliett Powell, two children, three grandchildren and five great grandchildren. He lived in Nashville, Tennessee.

Brother John David (J. D.) Thomas died on February 16 in Abilene, Texas. He was 93. Thomas taught at Abilene Christian University for 33 years, was chairman of the school's Bible Department for nine years and directed the Bible Lectureship for 18 years. A noted scholar and preacher, brother Thomas was also a prolific writer, having published 80 books on religious subjects. He was married for 67 years to Mary Katherine Payne Thomas, who preceded him in death. He is survived by two children, 10 grandchildren, and several great-grandchildren.

Our hearts go out to the families of both these great men of faith.

Discount Discipleship

by Kent Massey

Here is a quiz for you: Which of the following four sites is NOT a major tourist attraction in the state of North Carolina?

a. James K. Polk birthplace
b. Kitty Hawk
c. Mount Mitchell
d. Concord Mills

Trick question! They all are major attractions, and Concord Mills—one of the state's largest outlet malls—is among the top destination for many tourists and locals alike. Tourists want to visit not only Mt. Mitchell and Kitty Hawk, but also outlets for Bass Pro Shops, Liz Claiborne, Guess, and The Gap—some of the more than 200 stores at Concord Mills. Yes they are interested in James K. Polk and the Wright Brothers, but also in Brooks Brothers, Perry Ellis, Tommy Hilfiger, Levi Strauss and Eddie Bauer. Travelers want more leisure than learning.

A craving for saving has made this outlet mall unbelievably popular. And this phenomenon isn't limited to Concord Mills. A recent survey of 1,200 US adults by the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) says that 37% of travelers visited a discount mall within the last year. That translated into 55 million discount travelers out of a total of 149 million adult travelers annually!

In Luke 14, large crowds are following Jesus, looking for the same sort of world-class "savings" Americans crave today. Immediately, Jesus turns to them and tells them he is looking for disciples who are willing to pay full price—not deep discount disciples. Salvation isn't on sale and faithfulness is never marked down 50%. Discipleship (according to Jesus) requires a willingness to cut family ties, to face radical self-denial, and to give up one's material possessions. It is difficult, painful, tough and expensive. But Jesus requires nothing less from those who would travel with him.

To pay full price to follow Jesus means:

Strong Faith

Jesus demands that his disciples "hate" their fathers, mothers, wives, children, sisters and brothers. The Greek word for "hate" doesn't mean anger or hostility; it suggests a true disciple will value their relationship with Christ more than any other relationship they have.

> "While a deep-discount disciple might bear a little discomfort, a full-price follower knows the sacrifices and sufferings of a truly disciplined life"

A follower who pays full price knows their mission in life. Mother Teresa was once asked, "What gives you total ecstasy?" She answered smiling, "It is to see people die with smiles on their faces." You must know your life purpose and follow that purpose with everything you have.

Self-Discipline

Jesus calls us to carry the cross and follow him. If we follow a man with a cross on his back, why should we think that our end should be any different? Philip Yancey tells of a monk who once bragged about his dietary discipline. His spiritual director replied, "Don't tell me, my child, that you've spent 30 years without eating meat. But tell me the truth: How many days have you spent without speaking ill of your brother? Without judging your neighbor? Without letting useless words pass your lips?" Bearing the cross of Christ involves walking in the way of Christ. While a deep-discount disciple might bear a little discomfort, a full-price follower knows the sacrifices and sufferings of a truly disciplined life.

Selfless Generosity

We will know we have escaped the discount mall mentality of discipleship when we give with generosity. The greatest joy will come from giving lavishly, joyfully and recklessly because we know that is the kind of giver that God is.

Will Willimon (dean of The Chapel, Duke University) tells of getting a call one day from a very irate father. The father exploded on the phone to Willimon and said, “I hold you personally responsible for this!” It seems that the man was angry because his graduate school bound daughter had decided (in his words) to throw it all away and go and do mission work in Haiti with the Presbyterian Church.

The father screamed. “This is absurd! She has a degree from Duke University and she is going to go and dig ditches in Haiti. I hold you responsible for this!”

Willimon said, “Why me?” To which the father said, “Because you filled her head with all this religious stuff.”

Willimon asked the dad, “Sir, weren’t you the one who took her to church?” “Well, yes” the dad replied.

“Didn’t you take her to Sunday School as a little girl? “Yes I did!”

“And didn’t you allow her to go on youth trips when she was a teenager?” The father said, “Yes! But what does that have to do with anything?”

Willimon said, “Sir, you are the reason she is throwing it all away. You introduced her to Jesus. Not me!”

“But,” said the father, “all we wanted was a Presbyterian.” Willimon replied, “Well, sorry sir, you messed up. You’ve gone and made a disciple.”

Jesus wants full price followers not deep discount disciples. When we do that, we will discover a life of joy and fulfillment that cannot be found in any discount outlet mall on this earth. **Ω**

Searching for a Miracle

by Brian Prewitt

I recently saw a screening of Miracle, a new movie about the U.S. Men's Hockey Team and their victory over the Soviets in the 1980 Winter Olympics. Dubbed the "Miracle on Ice," it is a moment that has become legend in modern sports lore and is a story that has needed to be told on film for a long time.

The movie does the story justice, but while I could give thoughts on the movie or the historical events themselves, I find myself drawn in my reflection simply to the title. In some ways, the word "miracle" is probably appropriate for a sports movie. After all, whether it's the Miracle on Ice, the Miracle Shot, the Miracle Pass, or the Miracle Hit, we probably could each point to some miracle moment in our favorite sport or in the history of our favorite team. I'm writing this in Charlotte the day before the Panther's first Super Bowl, and I am waiting to hear the word tossed about soon in these parts.

But what is a miracle? Kurt Russell, who stars in Miracle as Herb Brooks, the U.S. coach, provides a fascinating definition. He says, "It's amazing how much hard work goes into making miracles. We see miracles quite often in sports. But really what they are is a confluence of conditioning, hard work and a new, creative approach to overcome the opposition" (The Sporting News, 2/2/04). Fascinating, isn't it?

A miracle is nothing more than an individual or team overcoming overwhelming odds through hard work, talent, and creativity.

> "Too often, we reduce spiritual growth to an easily packaged program that is obtained through the disciplined exercise of a few simple steps"

Of course, Russell is probably right in the world of sports, but what about the world of faith?

What if the miracles of our spiritual lives were nothing more than the confluence of good thinking, good talent, and good effort? Sarah would have had trouble giving birth to Isaac. Israel would have had trouble escaping Egypt. Christ's healing miracles would have been a bit different. The 5,000 would have gone away hungry, and if these physical miracles would have been a problem, what about the miracle of grace, or the miracle of the cross?

No, Miracle just shows us how much we misuse the word in sports. We define downward the concept of a miracle when we apply it to human effort. The danger we create for ourselves in doing this is that we allow the sports miracle concept to infect our spiritual lives. If the only way I can win the game is by out-preparing, out-conditioning, and out-performing the other guy, why should I expect it to be any different when I approach my relationship with God? Spiritual growth is reduced to the same human process of work and talent.

Unfortunately, evidence from our Christian culture suggests we have bought into this connection. Too often, we reduce spiritual growth to an easily packaged program that is obtained through the disciplined exercise of a few simple steps. Spiritual abundance is just a short book, a few daily exercises, or a simple prayer away. If we would just work a little harder and be a little more disciplined, we could experience the abundant life.

This is not to disparage the importance of spiritual discipline, but we need to build our spiritual discipline on the proper foundation, recognizing how desperately we need God in every aspect of our lives. Transformation in the Christian life is not analogous to an underdog hockey team facing a powerhouse. It's more analogous to a peewee team tacking on professional all-stars. Our journey to faith and in faith would be simply laughable but for the miracle of mercy that God brought to us in bringing us to faith, that Christ completed on the cross, and that the Holy Spirit is doing each and every day through his ministry in our hearts. I could buy the lie that faith is a result of my wise decision to believe, and my continued determination to overcome those sins that creep into my life when I am undisciplined. Or I can acknowledge that I am a hell-deserving sinner, who was brought to faith because of the amazing work of our Triune God, who is being sustained by the active ministry of the Holy Spirit in my life, and who will one day stand before the Throne of Glory and be welcomed into the eternal rest in the presence of God because of the God-glorifying work of Christ now completed. I gaze upon all of that and I am in awe. Because that, my friends, is a real miracle. **Ω**

Isaiah, the prophet of God to Judah, had many harsh things to say about God's people. "They had forsaken the Lord…and turned their backs on Him (Isaiah 1:4). They no longer respected God or what He did for them (5:12). Israel had rejected and despised God's instructions (5:24). They cheapened the worth of patiently waiting on the Lord to work out His purposes (vv.18-19). They devalued virtue and inflated evil (v.20). They overpriced their own wisdom and cleverness (v.21) and made heroes of heavy drinkers (v.22). Bribery routinely subverted justice (v.23). God had created a climate where goodness could flourish (vv.1-2), but His people had cultivated weeds and produced moral confusion.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard tells a parable of a man who broke into a Department store one night. Instead of stealing merchandise, he rearranged the price tags on many of the items in the store. The next morning the clerks and customers found one surprise after another: diamond necklaces for a dollar and cheap costume jewelry costing thousands. This is exactly what Israel had done – calling evil good and good evil – and what our postmodern culture is doing. The idea of the existence of God is spurned and rejected together with His moral and ethical teachings. What once was evil is now championed and accepted while good is trivialized.

What a challenge for the church! Unfortunately we live in the world and it has a great influence on our thinking as well as our attitudes and behaviors. As a result there is a great danger of becoming like the world. And when we as Christians live in disobedience to the Lord, our sinful actions reflect poorly on Him. We're not just hurting our own reputation when we fail to live up to God's holy standards, we're giving unbelievers an excuse for their low opinion of Him.

In a New York Times interview, a widely recognized man once voiced his displeasure with a fast-food chain in whose TV commercials he had appeared. He felt that the quality of their food he had advertised was no longer something he could endorse, and since people associated his name with the product, he didn't want the corporation's lowered standards to damage his name!

The Lord is also jealous of His name. He declared that He had been disgraced by the rebellious practices of His chosen people Israel. They had "profaned" His name among the nations (Ezekiel 36:21). During His earthly ministry, Jesus carefully protected the name of His heavenly Father and we should follow His example. God's jealousy for His character should motivate us to live more faithfully for Him.

May we who call Christ our Lord and Savior show the world by how we live the true value of "upright and godly lives" (Titus 2:12). Let's live for the Lord—for His name's sake.

-Peter Rod

Youth Matters:

Taking Care of Things

by David Kneip

How many times a day do you hear someone saying something like, "I'll take care of that?" Chores, homework, etc.: fairly often, at least in my world. My brother and his friends in college even used it as a command. Whether they were going to put the football game on TV, order a pizza, or get everybody organized at a church devo, they'd say to each other, "Take care of it!"

In my opinion, one of the neat things is that, unlike a lot of our sayings, telling someone that you'll "take care" of something actually means what you say. Saying something is "cool" has nothing to do with temperature, and "phat" has nothing to do with weight, but "taking care of something" means just that: "I'll do it. You don't have to worry about that." When you say it, you are actively taking over the care of something, big or small. We "take care" of babies and older people just like we "take care" of picking up Cokes for friends—one person does something so that the other doesn't have to worry about it anymore.

"Where is this going?" you may ask. I'll tell you—it's going right to 1 Peter 5:7, which says, "Cast all your cares on him, because he cares for you." I want to think about this verse a little with you this issue.

Peter wrote his letter to several churches in what is now part of Turkey. We don't know a whole lot about what was going on in their lives, but they seem to have been suffering some kind of persecution. The people of their area knew that they were Christians, and they were beginning to give them a little grief about it. They were being taken to court, perhaps for things they did not do, maybe made fun of, and they were struggling to understand why they were being subjected to these difficulties.

Peter spent his letter strengthening these congregations in different ways. He gave them theological ways of dealing with their troubles, telling them that in these "last times" their faith was being refined so that it would be pure and genuine, giving honor and glory to God (1:5-7). He gave them ethical advice about living in a pagan society, so that people would be thankful for the lives of the Christians even if they themselves were not worshippers of God (2:11-3:7). And he challenged them to be ready to answer for their faith should someone confront them about why they lived like they did—without drunkenness, orgies, idolatry, etc. (3:8-4:6).

In the end, though, I think that Peter knew that there are some trials in life that can't be conquered by knowledge, by behavior, or by willpower. There are things that happen to us that are so overwhelming, so unexplainable, so private, so public, or so long lasting, that we can't just decide to not worry about them. Some involve the future (where will I go? what should I do?) and others involve the past or the present (did I handle that right? what if I mess this up?) And that, my dear young friends, is why Peter wrote chapter 5, verse 7. When there is nothing else to do, there is something to do: cast your cares on the Lord, because he cares for you. Go to him in prayer. Spend time with him in secret, in quiet. Find members of his body (the church), and communicate with him in that way. Find people in the church with whom you can share your struggles, because in that way you are in fact casting your cares on the Lord Jesus.

What we learn, of course, in this process, is that we should be casting our cares on him all the time, precisely because he does care for us. He doesn't want to be the last resort; he wants to be the first resort! This message is always good to remember, no matter how far along we are in our Christian lives: that Jesus, very literally, wants to take care of our lives. He wants to take over the care of them, so that we are free to live for him, in love and service to his Father, to the church, and to the world.

As I heard a preacher say recently, "There is no care in our lives so small that we can carry it alone, and there is no care so large that it is too big for Jesus."

Cast your cares on him, because he cares for you. **Ω**

Families Matter:

Daily Bread

by Paul Jarrett

Family psychologists have discovered the importance of families eating at least one meal together each day. Children who do so enjoy better mental health and are more apt to succeed in school and in life.

I had this point driven home to me a number of years ago when I visited a young man in the mental ward of the hospital after he had attempted to take his life. He described to me how that, since his mother's death, he and his father and brother and sisters had not set down for a meal together in over a year.

The importance of regular social interaction among family members can hardly be overstated. It is especially important for parents to spend quality time with their children. Far too many husbands and wives and parents and children are living separate lives. This is not just true of those families torn apart by divorce. It can also be true of those living under the same roof when busy schedules lead to their being like the proverbial "ships passing in the night."

Studies indicate that couples that married so they could "spend the rest of their lives together," actually spend only about 30 minutes of quality time together in the average week. The time parents spend with their children may be even less. I saw one study that indicated that many children get less than 30 seconds a day of their parents' undivided attention.

It is possible for even good parents to fail to give their children what they need most—personal contact and direction. Fathers (and often mothers as well) work outside the home to provide their children with their basic physical needs. Cleaning, cooking, and other household chores are an important part of child-care. Good parents also make an effort to see that their children devote time to doing well in school, and engaging in church activities and wholesome recreation with their peers.

While all the activities I have mentioned may be worthwhile and necessary, they also contribute to the lack of personal contact I am addressing. Rather than being together, the parents are at work and the children are at school. Even when both the parent and the child are in the same general location, they may not be together. They may be in a different room of the house, or church building. Or, parents may be spectators watching their children perform in some program or on the athletic field.

When you consider how easy it is to be *apart* even when you are *with* your child, the importance of having a time set aside for personal interaction becomes even more obvious. Mealtime can become that time.

While the first step is to make it a point to eat together, you must do more than just sit at the same table. It is also important to have a meaningful dialogue. It does not have to be rehearsed or structured to be meaningful. However, this time needs to be approached with a sense of purpose.

The point I am making here was made in a *Reader's Digest* article I read a number of years ago. It was written by a minister who was describing what he would do differently if he could start over with his, now grown, children.

He wrote of how he would try to share his faith with his children in a more spontaneous way. Rather than scheduling family devotionals that often seemed forced, he wrote of how he would try to take greater advantage of the opportunities daily life provides to talk about God. For example, a beautiful sunset could provide a setting for talk of the Creator. The approach he suggested echoes these instructions found in Deuteronomy 6:6-7:

"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."

What better time and place to initiate this practice than when the entire family sits down to eat together? The mealtime conversation may begin with each one sharing something good about their day. The traditional mealtime blessing on the food may be expanded to include thanks for these blessings. The course of the conversation during the meal may be in response to happenings in your children's lives, or it may be some insight you, as a parent, may wish to share with them. I would only caution you to keep it positive and nourishing, like **daily bread**. **Ω**

Three Questions

by Mark Hudson

Jesus asked the strangest question. "Do you wish to get well?" He asked this of a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years (John 5:6). Do you wish to get well? I would think so, but the man did not answer with a resounding "YES!" If the question was strange, the answer (or lack of it) was even stranger. Could it be this man found comfort in his affliction? Healing would bring change and new responsibilities. Change and responsibilities can be scary.

Do you wish to get well? Perhaps we should ask the question of ourselves. Do I wish to get over my sin-sickness? Do I really wish to be free of my worst temptation? Do I want to be free of anger, evil thoughts, or addiction? Sin, especially willful sin, allows us to remain in a comfort zone. Refusal to repent shuts us off from the power of God.

The paralyzed man answered Christ's question by saying, "Sir, I have no man to put into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me." (John 5:7) At this pool, multitudes of "sick, blind, lame and withered" waited for an angel to stir the waters. (5:3-4) It was believe the first one into the water would receive healing. The man did not answer the question "Do you wish to get well?" Rather, he answered as if the question was "Whom do you blame?"

The paralytic blamed everyone else for his continued affliction. Nobody helped him. Others were rude and stepped in first. It's common today for people to claim "victim status." We justify our own bad behavior by blaming someone else. So, who do you blame?

"What are you looking for?" is a third question that begs to be asked in John 5. Jesus said to the man, "Arise, take up your bed and walk." Immediately, he took up his pallet and walked. The detractors of Christ could not deny that a miracle had taken place. They were, however, angry that the cured man carried his pallet on the Sabbath. (5:8-10). They witnessed the results of a miracle, but rather than seeing Jesus as the Son of God, they saw only a perceived infraction of law. They missed the greatness because they were looking for the wrong thing.

What are you looking for? Some listen in conversation only to find things to argue about. Others attend worship with a critical eye. They find fault with the singing, preaching and fellowship rather than participate in praising God. The can nit-pick the best efforts of others and see every good thing as a disaster.

Three questions for life: Do you wish to get well? Who do you blame? What are you looking for? Ω

Service to God

by Jim Mullican

John Milton is regarded as the greatest English poet of all time. He lived from 1608 until 1674, but in 1652 he became blind at the age of 44 and felt that he would never be able to write the great poems he had intended to write. In reality, he wrote his greatest poems after his blindness, including his famous *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Samson Agonistes.*

The turning point came when he realized the truth God expresses to Samuel when he sent him to anoint David as king over Israel. God said, "The LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart," (1 Samuel 16:7, ESV). Milton realized that his blindness did not mean he could no longer serve God, but only that the way he served might be different from what it would have been if he had not lost his vision. Thus, he wrote:

When I consider how my light is spent,
E'er half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide:
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?
I fondly ask; But Patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replied, "God doeth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best, his State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

Sometimes those who are the most faithful Christians find themselves feeling guilty for not doing more in the service of God. They may be limited in what they can do by failing health, by advanced age, by family circumstances, or by some other circumstances not of their own choosing or design. Their hearts are right with God and their desire is to do the will of God. They serve at every opportunity, but find that their opportunities are more limited than they wish. Those who find themselves in such a situation need to remember the lessons above.

God knows the desire and intention of your heart, and he knows your limitations. Remember his promise: "Even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." (Isaiah 46:4). The time comes to stand and await his call. **Ω**

Jim Mullican can be contacted at 1301 Sheldon Rd., Channelview, TX 77530.

[brotherhood news]

BY MARK HUDSON

Wingate, SC…*Wellington Smith* reports that there are eight families committed to establishing a new congregation (Wingate Church of Christ) in this Union County city. Wingate University is located in Wingate and Union County is one of the fastest growing areas in the southeast. The church is in need of $4,500 to help defray start up costs. Those interested in helping should contact brother Smith at (980) 328-8310.

Raleigh, NC…The *Brooks Ave. Church of Christ* will be hosting its 2004 Mid-Atlantic Evangelism Seminar September 17-19. The keynote speakers will be *Marvin Phillips* and *Don McLaughlin.*

Yadkinville, NC…The 18th annual Small Church Workshop will be hosted by the Yadkinville church on May 20-21. The theme this year is, "Come, Now is the Time to Worship." For more information call the church office at (336) 679-8924, or e-mail yadkinvillecoc@aol.com.

West Jefferson, NC…The *West Jefferson Church of Christ* will be hosting a ladies' day on September 11, 2004. The guest speaker will be *Nita Faye Leach* from Moundsville, WV. The church will also be hosting its 7th annual "Back to the Bible Lectureship" September 24-26. The theme will be "What is Truth?"

Goose Creek, SC…The newly established Church of Christ at Goose Creek, SC, began meeting at the community clubhouse on Planters Walk Blvd on Sunday, April 4. *Bryan Moten* will be serving as the minister, and he can be reached at 843-572-4709.

Statesville, NC…The *Northview Church of Christ* will host its annual Youthquake July30-August 1. The theme is "Crutch!" You can check online for more information at www.nvyouthquake.com.

[trends of interest]

Growing Churches Are Praying Churches

A recent survey by church consultant Thom S. Ranier confirmed the results of other similar studies: if the church is to grow, it must make prayer a priority. The survey, which included 576 evangelistic churches, found that 80 percent of respondents absolutely agreed to the statement, "Prayer is foundational to effective evangelism." The number who responded agree, very much agree, or absolutely agree accounted for more than 98 percent of the churches. Only 1 percent did not agree with the statement. Overall, then, nearly 70 percent rated congregational prayer as a major factor in evangelistic effectiveness.

Ranier's survey confirmed the conclusions of earlier surveys by C. Peter Wagner, George Barna, Kirk Hadaway and others that found a direct correlation between prayer and church growth. Of the 576 churches involved in Ranier's study, more than three-fourths have a congregation-wide prayer ministry. (Churchcentral.com, February 27, 2004)

Growth and Decline in Church Groups

According to the Presbyterian Church-USA News, the newest edition of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* ranks the three largest U.S. churches as the Roman Catholic Church (66.4 million members), the Southern Baptist Convention (16.2 million) and the United Methodist Church (8.3 million). The major U.S. churches that recorded growth between 2001 and 2002 included the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Assemblies of God, the American Baptist Churches in the USA, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ (listed together), the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of God. Six of the 25 largest churches reported membership losses: the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod), the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and the United Church of Christ.

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knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.

36 For these things were done, that the scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of him shall not be broken.

37 And again another scripture saith, They shall look on him whom they pierced.

38 And after this Joseph of Ar-i-ma-thæ'-a, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave *him* leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus.

39 And there came also Nic-o-de'-mus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound *weight*.

40 Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

41 Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid.

CHAPTER 20

THE first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.

2 Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.

3 Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre.

4 So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre.

5 And he stooping down, *and looking in*, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in.

6 Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie,

7 And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by

Create in me a clean heart, O God...

Psalm 51:10

carolina christian

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Editorial & Publication Staff
Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
Catherine Thacker, Design Editor

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An Ancient Idolatry in Modern Clothes

by Dennis Conner

It was an unsettling realization I had come to about myself: I was dangerously close to becoming an idolater. And no, not an idolater in the modern sense of putting things, career and such in the place of God. No, I was close to becoming an old fashioned idolater in the sense of following a different god, a false god, a god not revealed in Scripture.

It happened while preparing a sermon for a series on the book of Exodus that I was preaching at the time. The biblical narrative brought me to Exodus 32, the chapter of the golden calf. Ah, here was the perfect opportunity to step on some toes, to rail hot and heavy against the idolatries in our lives□the love of money and things, the pursuit of pleasure, and careers and family coming before God. It had been a while since I had read the chapter and some of the details had been forgotten. Then, as I read on, some of those forgotten details rocked me; not with their freshness, but with their severity.

> “He is a God to be worhiped, not idolized”

When Moses witnessed for himself the shameless idolatry of the people, he simply blew! “So Moses’ anger became hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain,” (v. 19). Then, after rebuking his brother, Aaron (in whose care Moses had left the people), Moses issued a challenge. “Whoever is on the LORD’S side, come to me,” (v. 26). All the sons of Levi aligned themselves with the Lord. Then, Moses told the Levites to take up their swords and go throughout the camp, “and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor,” (v. 27). When it was all over with, three thousand had been executed.

I vividly remember my very first thought after reading that afresh: “I can’t preach that!” And why that thought? Because this gruesome story clashed with the primary image of God I had come to hold, the image of a good, loving, kind and tender God who delighted in mercy and not judgment (Micah 7:16, one of my favorite verses). Then, no sooner had the first thought subsided when another entered my mind, revealing the troubling irony of my initial reaction to the text: "Dennis, here you are preparing a sermon against idolatry, when you're not much more than an idolater yourself." How so? Because my reaction to the text revealed that I had embraced a God I could be comfortable with, a God I could like as well as love, a God who was the way I wanted him to be; in essence, a God of my creation. And how is creating a likeable God in my own mind any different than one of the ancients fashioning from wood or stone with his own hands a god according to his limited perception? Both are attempts to deal with the divine on man's own terms.

It wasn't that my understanding of God as good, loving, kind and tender was wrong. Scripture teaches that God is all of those things. The problem was that it was a limited understanding of God, and I was content to leave it at that; content because that's the way I liked my God.

It's a common problem manifested in the perceptions of Christians and non-Christians alike. We want a nice God, not One who is capable of raining down punishment and destruction. Many of us have tired of hearing about the vengeful God of hell-fire and brimstone preaching (to the neglect of his grace and kindness) and have found it easier and more comfortable to stake our claim to the God of mercy and grace. Many non-Christians look at texts like Exodus 32 and conclude, "What a vindictive God!" They, too, want a God who is more politically correct and attractive. They want God the way they like him. For both groups, God is created in their image (or perception).

Any pared down version of God that neglects or ignores other attributes of God as a consequence of what appeals to us robs him of his mystery and complexity. No human being is as one-dimensional as we sometimes want God to be. We are considerably complex beings ourselves. So, do we dare imagine that the One who created us should be any less complex? Do we really want a "God of our understanding," a God whose character and work is only as big as our limited human understanding?

There are only two options open to us: accept God in his fullness (in all that he is), or believe in no God. If we embrace the first option, you can be sure that there are unsettling things about God that we will never understand. There are things we may not even like, but it is not our prerogative to diminish or dismiss those aspects of the divine. We must allow him to be the God he is while we wrestle with the complexities of his being. He is capable of love and wrath (Paul, the great champion of grace, reminded the Roman Christians to "behold both the goodness and severity of God"), mercy and justice, grace and law. He is the creator and sustainer of this vast universe, a universe that merely reflects his own vastness. Fear, love and awe are all appropriate responses to such a God. He is a God to be worshiped, but not idolized.

The second option—believe in no God—is the only thing worse than idolatry. It offers only questions and no answers. It provides no hope for the innocent victims of evil and no ultimate justice for the evildoer. Man rules and chaos reigns. Even the most optimistic humanism is rendered bankrupt when we view the evil and wickedness man has wrought on his fellow man. Without God idolatry remains; it's just that now the object of man's idolatry is himself.

Let us be done with "the God of our understanding," for that is little more than old idolatry in new clothes. Rather, let us pursue and worship the God who is. Let us acknowledge his complexity and mystery, confessing meaningfully that his ways are not our ways, bowing in awe before his holiness. But let us not attempt to melt him down and pour him into the mold of our own criteria for "likeability."

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Helpless, but Not Hopeless

by Ron Newberry

Drafted by the Detroit Lions in 1952 he played with the Chicago Cardinals and New York Giants until 1961. However, hanging up the cleats did not mean leaving the game he loved. He joined CBS as a broadcaster, and in 1993 he moved to Fox.

Pat Summerall, now 73, a veteran kicker, receiver and broadcaster once considered the voice of the NFL, faced surgery for a liver transplant in Jacksonville, Florida in early April of this year. He was dying!

Over the past few years, Pat spoke openly but not braggingly about his earlier life. He and a fellow broadcaster partied hardy off the field. He often said, "We raised Cain. I was the first guy at the bar and the last to leave." Someone finally got through to him and told him that if he kept on drinking he was going to die.

As many other celebrities have done, Pat took charge of his life and checked himself into the Betty Ford Clinic to break the alcohol addiction. While in the clinic Summerall reported in the January 30, 2002 edition of USA Today, "…my counselor was a big New York Giants fan. He kept impressing to me that there's more to life than what I had done so far. He said I should hope for a better life, to have faith, and I would find out what that better life was." At age 66, Pat Summerall was baptized. In the USA Today story he told a reporter that when the minister "…leaned me back in the water, I never felt so helpless. I knew I just became a Christian. I can't tell you how great life has been since then."

> "Baptism is a faith response to the good news that Jesus has provided all that's needed to save us"

Is that not the precise point everyone who would be saved must reach? Don't we all have to get to the point that we realize we are dying spiritually and that we are helpless to stop the eternal disaster? Then we trust in someone else to save us because we cannot save ourselves. Even if we could control the future so as to never sin again, we cannot undo all the past damage to our souls. We need a heart transplant as surely as Pat Summerall needed a liver transplant.

“Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:38). That was the apostle Peter’s response to the masses that begged to know the solution to their dilemma of having killed Jesus. Repentance apart from baptism is not sufficient. However, neither is baptism without repentance effective. The two aspects of salvation work in tandem to make God’s saving grace effectual.

Baptism is a faith response to the good news that Jesus has provided all that’s needed to save us. In baptism we are undeniably helpless both literally and symbolically. We are sinners, not in the hands of an angry God, but in the hands of a merciful God. Every penitent, baptized believer on the whole planet is promised the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. There is work involved; that’s certain. However, it is not our work that counts for anything. We are powerless, feeble and vulnerable. But God comes to our aid!

Pat Summerall learned a valuable lesson about life: behavior has consequences. He may have been baptized and forgiven but the consequences of his past lifestyle were not erased because his soul was cleansed in the blood of Jesus. But thanks be to God that he learned the answer to the most important question in life: “What can take away my sins?” The only true answer to that question is, “Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

In April of this year Pat was released from the hospital after a successful liver transplant. No one knows how long he will live on earth. Seven years ago in baptism Pat Summerall received a new heart. Those who believe the Bible and understand the power of the blood of Jesus know how long Pat will live eternally. “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son” (1 John 5:11).

Youth Matters:
The Gospel & Duke Basketball

by David Kneip

Many of you know that I am a Duke fan. As you can well imagine, I was rather disappointed several weeks ago, when the Blue Devils had a chance for another national championship in men's basketball. Unfortunately, they lost to the University of Connecticut, and their season was over.

Don't worry: I'm not using this whole column to write about Duke basketball, and I'm not even that interested in how the game ended. What I think is important is how most of us Duke fans reacted to the loss. If you read stories in the newspaper or on the Web, you read how Duke "threw away the loss," "totally choked," or "handed UConn" the win." Stories from Duke fans were pretty much the same.

You may not have noticed, but statements like these come fairly often from fans, players, and coaches who are accustomed to success. Further, this happens all the way from kids' games to the pros. These folks have won so often, and their system or style of play is so successful, that the only explanation for a loss is that "we didn't execute," "we didn't hit our shots," or something like that. My question is: what about the other team? That's right: in games like these, it takes two to tango. Duke didn't just lose in that game; they lost to UConn. That is very important, and it kind of shoots a few holes in what people say after the game. You don't hear nearly as often about how a team didn't score because the other team played great defense. Nor do you hear very much that a team couldn't execute because the other team disrupted their game plan.

Let me highlight what I'm saying, for I think it's pretty huge: in games like these, there are two teams playing, and both affect the outcome.

You may be saying, "Where in the world is he going with this?" This is it: I think that sometimes, as Christians, we react to failed interactions with non-Christians in ways similar to those of Duke basketball teams this spring. How? Let me show you an example.

Imagine the last few times you have tried to reach out to people in a really serious way. This might be on a personal level, talking to an acquaintance, a friend, or even a boy or girlfriend. Or, it could be at the church level, starting or continuing a program to reach out to the community. My guess is that, if you're like me, not all of your efforts in this way have been successful. Maybe sometimes people show interest, but not always. So how do you react?

In my experience, we often react much like Duke fans to a loss. This doesn't mean that we're arrogant—that's where the analogy breaks down. But it does mean that we think about what we did wrong or what we could have done better more than we think about the other person. We say things like this: "How can we improve this program?" "I just need to figure out a better 'opening line' to get that person interested." "Maybe I need to find better Bible verses."

I think this happens for at least two reasons. First, Christianity is kind of like Duke basketball: it's been successful for a long time (okay, maybe a little longer). It has appealed to people across continents and eras, and so when it doesn't appeal to someone, it has to be with the way we "told" it. Or so we think. Another possible reason for this reaction is two-fold: we know how much Christianity has meant to us, and we want to bless others. We may have had relationships with people we really look up to in terms of the church or following Jesus, and so we see someone's non-response to Jesus as a non-response to us. And we can always do better.

But remember: it takes two to tango. Whenever you're talking with someone about the Bible, about the church, about God, about Jesus, about coming to camp or a youth rally with you, you're always having a dialogue, and that means two people are involved. You aren't an actor, performing a monologue which people either like or don't. You are having a conversation, and that involves talking as well as listening. That person has a history, questions, dreams, fears, and things that they worship (whether or not they call those things "God"). In other words, they are human beings, just like you. Would you want someone to treat you like a concrete wall?

So, let me offer a few suggestions. First, when you talk with people, don't be afraid to ask them questions. We aren't always on the defensive. Ask them about their lives – or what they really want out of life. Ask them what they think about social, moral, or spiritual things before you automatically tell them what you think. By doing this, you not only learn more about who they are and where they're coming from, you also build valuable trust with them.

Second, when they do answer you, make sure to listen. Nothing is more frustrating than talking to someone who obviously isn't listening or is just waiting till they get their turn to talk. Look people in the eye, listen to what they say, and really care about them and about what they say as they talk. Remember, you're portraying Jesus to them – a wonderful opportunity, but also a difficult challenge.

Finally, don't be afraid to admit you don't know the answer to something. It doesn't make you a bad Christian if you can't quite remember a Bible verse you want to share, or if you want to ask your minister, parents, or church friends about the issue at hand.

Let me make sure you hear me right. In making these suggestions, I'm not saying that we shouldn't have a ready answer for people who ask us about the hope we have (1 Peter 3:15), because we definitely should. I'm also not saying we should let what the other person thinks rule the discussion or silence us; we have a wonderful gospel to tell, and we don't need to be ashamed of it.

Finally, I'm not suggesting that this is the cure-all to our problems in converting the world. Changing our focus is not the magic bullet, so to speak. Our treating them in a different way will not guarantee that they will automatically decide to give their lives to Christ. However, I do think that this kind of behavior will help prepare this person's soil for other people to plant a seed one day, even if they reject us right now.

May God bless us as we strive to serve him and to witness to his love, power, and activity in ways that are faithful.

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Intentional Parenting

by Jim Bales

The average American child spends 38.5 hours a week watching TV, movies, videos, and playing computer and video games. In a Christian home, an average child spends half an hour a week in Bible study or worship, including church attendance. The average kindergarten graduate has already spent 6,000 hours watching television. The same kindergartner has participated in 400 hours of Bible study and worship with her family/church. By the sixth grade, the average child will have watched 100,000 acts of violence on TV. More than 90% of kids 10-17 have recently watched an R-rated movie on video or in the theater, and 79% watched with their parents! (I quizzed some of our church kids recently and found that one of their favorite movies was "Matrix"). According to research, about $2 billion was spent in 1998 on advertising directed strictly at children. Children diagnosed with ADD/ADHD have increased almost 500% since 1989. Could this be related in any way to the above stats? What's a Christian parent to do besides panic? It is your duty and privilege as a Christian parent to protect your kids from the dangers of this spiritual battle being waged against them. Believe me, this is incredibly spiritual, and it's all out war! Satan wants your sons and daughters, but remember they already belong to God! Moms and Dads, It's time to fight! It sounds really hard to do sometimes, but it really isn't. Pray! Then, try this little exercise—turn off the TV. "Yikes!" Don't rent that movie. "R" means wait until your 17! Don't buy that computer game. "No way!" (Remember that getting your kids to like you is not part of your job description.) I know, I know, you're thinking, "Mr. Jim, you don't have kids and you don't understand!" You are right. Parenting is so much easier on the outside looking in! What I do understand is that you would never do anything to intentionally hurt your children. You love them too much. If I told you that you could dramatically improve your kids' spiritual and emotional health by being more intentional about what goes in their eyes and ears and mind, would you be interested? You Can! I'm reminded of a memory verse I learned at fourth grade Bible camp. "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things," (Philippians 4:8). That's a simple formula. Cut it out of this article right now and post it on the refrigerator. If something the kids want to do doesn't pass this test, no one gets to do it. Let Paul the apostle be the fall guy; he wrote it, not you!

I can't wait to hear your battle stories and see the victories that God will win through you and your kids!

A Motivating Eschatology

by Paul Jarrett

Eschatology is defined as, "the branch of theology dealing with final events." It is a topic which holds a great deal of fascination to people because it speaks to the desire of so many to know the future.

Hal Lindsey and others have made a fortune selling books that purport to explain what the Bible says about future events. Many religious groups and individuals have announced dates for the return of Christ on more than one occasion resulting in a temporary swelling of church membership roles.

There are many flaws in the approach to eschatology that is practiced by people like Hal Lindsey and churches such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. These flaws become evident when the events they have foretold fail to come to pass. When this occurs (as it inevitably will) the faith of believers is undermined, and the enemies of Christ are given yet another example of what they cite as religious foolishness.

The primary flaw in the more popular approaches to the topic of eschatology is the tendency to focus on the signs and events believed to be associated with the end of time. This mistake can be avoided if we realize that Jesus spoke of the absence of signs preceding His coming. Instead, He compared His coming to that of a "thief in the night' (see Matthew 24:36-44).

The apostle Paul made this same point when he responded with these words to those in Thessalonica who were interested in times and events: "But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober." I Thessalonians 5:1-6

Rather than seeking to know about the events surrounding the end of time (Note: It might surprise you to know that the Bible never speaks of "the end of time" PEJ), we would all do well to seek to focus on what the psalmist desired to know:

"Lord, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am. Indeed, You have made my days as handbreaths, and my age is as nothing before You; certainly every man at his best state is nothing but vapor. Surely every man walks about like a shadow; surely they busy themselves in vain; he heaps up riches, and does not know who will gather them." Psalm 39: 4-6

True eschatology focuses on our coming to know our end. We must come to realize that our life here in the flesh is "a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away" (James 4:14). We must realize that "the things which are seen are temporary, but the things that are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). For,"It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Therefore, "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13,14).

Peter pointed out that those in his day who claimed that all things had been the same since the creation were guilty of overlooking what happened to the world of Noah's day (see 2 Peter 3:3-6). Those who doubt what Jesus said about God's coming judgment in our day would do well to consider the fact that the temple and the city of Jerusalem met exactly the fate that He had predicted (see Matthew 24:1,2). True eschatology informs us that physical things will pass away and calls us to a life of holiness in response: "Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?" (2 Peter 3:10-13).

Paul Jarrett can be contacted at pejarrett@earthlink.com

The Wardrobe

by Kent Massey

especially a new one from Great Britain called "What Not to Wear." It is hosted by two "thirtysomething" women whose acid commentary about what women are wearing these days makes Simon Cowell of American Idol sound like Mr. Rogers.

Their honest and open advice has helped many fashion impaired women make better decisions about their wardrobe choices. They specialize in turning ugly ducklings into stylish swans. Given a shopping spree with 5,000 pounds (roughly $7,500 dollars) they have only one rule—follow the new rules.

The premise of the show is not to transform the lucky women into supermodels. But it is about helping them avoid "what not to wear" and putting on the best-fitting, best looking clothes possible, clothes that are suited for their particular body style and shape.

While watching the show, I began to wonder, "What befits us least as followers of Christ?" "What looks absolutely awful on a Christian?" Those questions answered should also help us see what looks good on a Christian.

What does the well–dressed Christian avoid wearing? This isn't an invitation to check out the wardrobe choices of those around us. Mark Twain once said, "Clothes make the man," but our outer garments are not of interest to God. God is concerned about how the inner person is clothed.

Paul gives us a list of some things that look awful on a Christ follower: "Have nothing to do with sexual sin, impurity, lust, and shameful desires. Don't be greedy for the good things of this life, for that is idolatry. But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old evil nature and all its wicked deeds. In its place you have clothed yourselves with a brand-new nature that is continually being renewed as you learn more and more about Christ, who created this new nature within you," (Colossians 3:5, 8-10).

Paul doesn't pull any punches. These clothes are ill suited for any Christian. But then he gives us a five-point program for Christ-like sartorial splendor. Any person would look smashing wearing these qualities openly and in abundance: "Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience," (Colossians 3:

12).

But Paul (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) gives us the greatest fashion accessory advice when he writes, "And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us together in perfect harmony." (Colossians 3:14).

Paul's invitation is to imagine yourself standing before your open closet surveying your wardrobe. If you find anything in your life that is on this list—impurity, greed, anger, malice, abusive language, lying—you should give it the old heave-ho. It is totally unacceptable for a follower of Christ. Looks hideous. And if you wear it, you couldn't look more awful. God will help you, and the Spirit will empower you to throw away those no good clothes.

There are some professions that you can recognize by their clothes. You see a guy on the street, wearing a dark blue uniform, a badge on his chest and a gun on his hip—and you know immediately, that guy is a police officer. You know what he does by his clothes.

Go into the hospital and you see a woman dressed in a white coat, with a stethoscope around her neck, and you correctly surmise—she's a doctor!

What Paul is saying in Colossians 3 is that people should be able to recognize a Christian by his or her moral wardrobe. We don't wear the clothes of the world because we now are clothed with Christ. And people will know who we are by the love we have for each other.

Vince Lombardi was once asked what it took to make a winning team. He said that there were three things: The first two, fundamentals and discipline, are not enough to win the game. The third element had to be present as well: "If you're going to play together as a team, you've got to care for one another. You've got to love each other. Each player has to be thinking about the next guy and saying to himself: If I don't block that man, Paul is going to get his legs broken. I have to do my job well in order that he can do his. The difference between mediocrity and greatness is the feeling these guys have for each other."

My wife Vallarie is getting ready to stow away the winter clothes, and bring the spring and summer clothes out of storage. This has been the perfect time for me to go through my wardrobe and get rid of some things that just don't fit anymore, or clothes that just don't look good.

Maybe as spring time comes, this is a good time for us all to go through our spiritual wardrobes and get rid of those things that don't just fit and that we aren't supposed to be wearing.

Happy makeover!

What does the Lord Require?

by Roger Coffman

Several years ago a cartoon showed Satan standing at the gates of Hell welcoming newcomers. The caption read, "You will find that there is no right or wrong…Only what works for you!"

Today we find ourselves living in a society which is sharply divided over what constitutes right and wrong. There are significantly divergent views ranging from extreme permissiveness (where right is "whatever works for you") to utilitarianism (where right is whatever benefits you the most), to ultra-conservatism (where every issue tends to be a moral one and someone speaks authoritatively on all such matters.)

In such a context the message of the Old Testament prophet, Micah, needs to be heard again. Even though we often approach the Old Testament with a bias of having freed ourselves from the ritualism and legalism of our ancient forefathers, we pay a heavy price for this bias. In so doing, we no longer hear large sections of God's word as having any usefulness for us. But if we are willing to identify with our spiritual ancestors, we may hear God's ancient word speaking to our modern context.

As Christians, we must continually ask, "What is good?" and "What does the Lord require?" Micah answered those questions this way:

"He has showed you O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To do justly, and to love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Roger Coffman has just recently completed a fruitful ministry with the Church of Christ on Hilton Head Island, SC.

A Personal Letter from Jesus

by Jerry Senn

Jesus wrote, through the pen of John, to a local church and probed their very being. He helped them to see themselves as he saw them. It is preserved for us and should be taken as a personal letter to us because, from my experience, all churches need this letter.

Jesus said to John, “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Ephesus…I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don’t tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting.”

“Duty, keeping the rules, and getting the job done had overshadowed their first passion and fire for God”

Don’t we often feel that Jesus isn’t personally concerned with what is going on in our churches, and do we forget that his evaluation is more important than our own or what the “brotherhood” thinks of us? We want to measure up, to be a good influence, and we should. But, everything we do—the hard work, the patience, our intolerance of evil, the way we scrutinize false claims, expose error, suffer for Christ, and persevere—is seen by Jesus. Jesus commended these attributes in the Ephesian church, but do we think such good works are equivalent to good spiritual health?

Jesus’ letter continues, “But I have this complaint against you. You don’t love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen from your first love! Turn back to me again and work as you did at first. If you don’t, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches.”

Wow! He hits them right in the gut! He cuts them to the core. All this work, faithful preaching and teaching, discerning of error in others, exposure of false teachers, and suffering without quitting, and he would dare call us into question for our level of love? Didn’t he teach us that to love him was to obey him, and haven’t we always emphasized obedience? Keeping the structure intact, the message true, the level of activity high, undergoing trials; how could we "do church" better than we're doing it? Shouldn't he be grateful we have stuck it out and held our own? The truth is, he compliments them for those things.

However, their internal response, the motivation that comes from gratitude and love, had diminished to a dangerous level. Duty, keeping the rules, and getting the job done had overshadowed their first passion and fire for God. Something happened between the baptistery and the pew, between adolescence and adulthood. They had lost something vital for spiritual health.

Losing the first love is what happens in relationships when the passion and fire are not fueled and maintained over time. Duty begins to overshadow love as the motive, and when this happens something dies within the body of Jesus' followers. And the deadness spreads.

John Phillips wrote, "With eyes aflame, the Lord says that one large debit consumed all their credit…It is possible to serve the Lord for a variety of reasons—for the praise of men, for prestige or position, for the sake of reputation, because it is simply the thing to do, because of a sense of duty. If service for God is not born of a devoted passion for the Lord Jesus it is worthless…The furnace was still there, but the fire had gone out. There was a measure of warmth, but the coals no longer had a bright, red luster…With that slow but certain cooling of passion for Christ, distance had crept in." (*Exploring Revelation*, pp. 41-42).

What frightens me most about this letter is that it is addressed to the "angel" of the church at Ephesus, which means it was to be read and applied first by the leadership. With our emphasis on "doing right things in right ways," we must make sure the "first love" passion—the excitement of our salvation—prevails in our hearts and watch it spread to others. Let us make these words our prayer: *"Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me…Restore to me again the joy of your salvation…Then I will teach your ways to sinners,"* (Psalm 51: 10-13).

Jerry Senn, who serves the church in Hendersonville, NC, as preacher and elder, can be contacted at hvlcoc@bellsouth.net.

Holders of the Truth

by Kyle Swicegood

to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18)

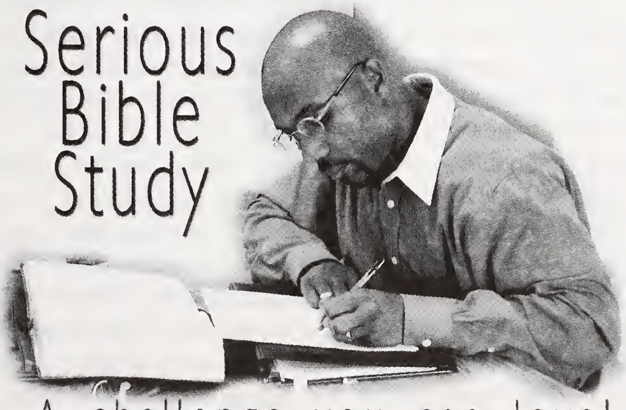
"Holders of the Truth." I have heard some of our brothers reference this idea about how we as members of the church are holders of the truth. As men, the thought of us having the truth is empowering; it's authoritative, it's even self justifying. Pondering this idea, I began to evaluate my view of believers. Jesus gave a parable once that spoke about keepers of truth. In Luke 18:9, Jesus spoke about two men who went to the temple to pray. The story shows us two polarized attitudes. A Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself, thanking God that he wasn't like other men. He fasted twice and contributed according to the rules. On the other hand, the tax collector stood at a distance. He was ashamed even to lift his face sunward as he prayed "God have mercy on me, a sinner.

Have we as a group of believers have ever puffed our chests out? Maybe we have pinned awards on our lapels for above average attendance in church, or maybe even disassociated ourselves from "believers who are different than we are" because we had the truth and they didn't. In my study of Luke 18, I realized that we don't have an exhaustive understanding of the truth yet. While I cherish the plea for bible study and truth, we are all sinners and don't have a monopoly on truth. Truth is an ever evolving aspect of our lives; otherwise there would be no need to study any longer. The Pharisee was arrogant and self righteous. The tax collector was humble and contrite. What contrasting hearts.

The study of this parable has changed my life. Being able to quote scripture or win theological arguments will not earn my way to heaven. More often than not, we find ourselves arguing over methodology instead of theology. In this world where we try to draw lines in the sand over non-essential truths, let us consider the lesson from this parable. Jesus said, "I tell you that this man (the tax collector), rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus accepts humble hearts, not hearts that are puffed up because of knowledge.

Kyle Swicegood worships with the Jericho church of Christ in Mocksville, NC.



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Worship as Ministry

by Dennis Conner

It is not uncommon in many congregations to find this inscription over the doors leading into the sanctuary: "Enter to worship, leave to serve." Underlying this church cliché is the notion that service is something that takes place outside the worship assembly. Worship may inspire service, but in the understanding of many, service is not something that happens in worship, even though we often refer to "the worship service." Contrary to the popular notion, there is ministry (service) going on in the worship assembly. But to whom does worship minister, and how does it minister?

Worship is for God

The point has been made repeatedly, and correctly so, that the focus of our worship is God. It is all about the God who is seated on the throne of the universe. Therefore, it is wholly inappropriate for the worshiper to focus on what he or she may "get out of it." That's a self-centered approach to worship and betrays a not so subtle consumer mentality. Very simply, worship is God's due, not ours.

The psalmist understood this fundamental truth. David urges, "Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, Give unto the LORD glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name (emphasis mine, DC); worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness," (Psalm 29:1-2). Anything God does for and gives to us is a matter of grace, but when we offer God our worship, we are giving to Him that which is owed; that which He deserves! Worship is our service to God.

That leads us to an important question: if worship is chiefly for God and is not about me, then why do we worship with other people? Why not just worship God in private in my own way?

Worship Inspires the Community

Psalm 84 movingly expresses the deep longing of the soul: "How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD! My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God...Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they will still be praising You...For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand," (vv. 1-2, 4, 10). That longing can to some extent be satisfied in private worship, but over and over again Scripture calls us to be a worshiping community. "O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt His name together," (Ps. 34: 3). As worship satisfies our individual longing for God, it also produces community solidarity. It inspires and strengthens a sense of togetherness, without which it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a vital faith. The preacher in Hebrews understood this when he exhorted his beleaguered readers in Hebrews 10:25 not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together..." Just prior to that he had exhorted his readers to hold fast to the confession they had made of Christ and he understood that bonding in worship with people of like faith would be essential to holding fast. They would not be able to survive the tough times alone. They needed to draw upon the strength of the community. Thus, Hebrews 10:25 is not a legalistic "church attendance" requirement. Rather, it expresses a principle of spiritual survival! It is in the community expression of worship that we are to find our motivation to love and service. We need to be connected to people of faith to stay connected to our faith.

So, while the objective of worship is not to "get something out of it," the truth is that when God is truly worshiped, we do derive a blessing ourselves. Our faith is challenged and strengthened. We enjoy the mutual encouragement and accountability of the community of God. As Ronald Allen has correctly noted, "True public worship fuels edification," (The Wonder of Worship, p. 30).

There is a third aspect of the ministry of worship.

Worship Has Power to Evangelize

The fundamental meaning of "evangelism" is the act of proclaiming the gospel, (the good news) about God's saving work in Jesus Christ. There is no more natural setting for that proclamation than worship. While worship is not for the unbeliever, it still has the power to minister to the unbeliever by being a forum for the proclamation of the gospel.

Further, when an unbeliever personally witnesses the power of faith expressed in the authentic worship of gathered believers, it can be used by the Holy Spirit to bring conviction to his or her heart. 1 Corinthians 14: 22-25 is a glimpse into the power of worship to minister to an unbeliever. In this text an unbeliever comes into a Corinthian worship assembly and witnesses the Spirit's power in the worshipers. Consequently, the unbeliever is led to "fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you.'" Questions about spiritual gifts aside, Paul in this text acknowledges the power of worship to be used by the Holy Spirit to bring conviction to an unbeliever.

What we see, then, are the three reaches of worship ministry: upreach (ministering to God in worship that is his due), inreach (ministering to other believers, edifying them through worship), and outreach (ministering to unbelievers as the gospel is proclaimed in the power of the Spirit).

TradingSpaces

by Kent Massey

Makeover madness is sweeping the country. From *Trading Spaces* to *Designing for the Sexes*, there are 12 different "reality" makeover shows currently showing on television. From bedrooms to basements, "expert" designers and style mavens are determined to make our living spaces more beautiful than ever before. It is an amazing transformation to see a living room transformed from a post-college décor (complete with cinder block and plywood coffee table) to something from the cover of *Southern Living*.

But what happens after the cameras stop rolling and you have to live with the changes that someone else has made for you?

Susie Molnar of Northhampton, Pennsylvania can tell you. A recent guest on the show *Trading Spaces*, (where neighbors are given $1,000 to redo a room in each other's home) she knew her family room needed a new look. With baby blue paneling and shag carpet, it was 70's chic. But imagine her surprise when she opened her eyes and discovered that the designer's red satin curtains looked like they came from a "brothel" and walls were painted the color of "baby poop."

Or Jessie Stephens of Las Vegas. She told her designer and neighbor that seeing brown in the remake of her living room would make her "sad". Sad? It was more like homicidal.

When confronted with the remake, the cocoa-colored walls caused her to leave the room in anger. When brought back on camera to face her designing neighbor, she was still mad. By the next frame of film, she was wrestling her neighbor to the floor. "I just went kind of crazy there for a second," she later shared.

Producers of *Trading Spaces* say that the percentage of those who dislike their home remakes are small. But they have generated enough angst-ridden homeowners to produce their own video titled, *They Hated It.*

The reality of reality is that external makeovers have a short shelf life. Eventually bean bag chairs go out of style, mauve carpet becomes passé, and puce walls nauseate.

Paul gives good advice on a remake that will never go out of style. "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from

God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God," (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

What Paul is talking about is a transformation from the inside out. When a person obeys the gospel, the remake is nothing less than stunning. The old, junky, musty, filthy sin-filled past is carted out to the dumpster and replaced with a brand-new, custom-made, personal living space in which Christ dwells as resident and president. It is a new creation that stands the test of time.

And the changes are gradual. The spiritual remake takes more time because of the pervasiveness of the old décor. And that's okay. Because we have a God who is prepared to take whatever time is needed (and not just 48 hours) to work deep in the dark rooms of our lives to create something new and stunning. It is God's intent to live within us—loving, leading, and making us his own. God isn't just into renovations, he is into restorations.

C.S. Lewis understood this when he wrote the following in his masterful work, *Mere Christianity*: "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace," (*Mere Christianity*, p. 172).

Get the Jesus remake. It is the only re-do that always works, and never goes out of style.

The Habit of Faith

by Jerry Senn

this is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it," (Psalm 118:24).

Henri Nouwen once wrote, "The real enemies of life are the 'oughts' and 'ifs.' They pull us backward into the unalterable past and forward into the unpredictable future. But real life takes place in the here and now. God is always in the moment, be that moment hard or easy, joyful or painful."

Learning to live in the "moment" is a habit of faith! Biblical faith! Is not simply the adopting of a belief system or mentally buying into theological concepts. That is involved, of course, but unless what we believe sustains us in the daily struggles of life, our "faith" is seriously flawed and ineffective. Many of us spend far too much time thinking in terms of "if only" this or that had occurred, or not occurred. The list of "if onlys" is endless. We can become almost totally preoccupied with them and in the process destroy our capacity to seize the present opportunity or enjoy the daily blessings God so lovingly provides.

And, we do the same with the "what ifs." Our Lord warned, "Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?... Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble," (Matthew 6: 25, 34).

Here are some helpful suggestions in developing a habit of faith:

1. Live with a sense of expectancy. God is really at work in our lives on an hourly basis. Allow your faith to experience his hand on your life.
2. Read God's word in the present tense. What is he saying to you about what is going on in your life right now? (See Hebrews 4:7-8) He has a word for every day.
3. Practice moments of contemplative (in your closet) prayer, speaking to your Father from the depths of your soul. (Matthew 6:6)
4. Dare to savor the moment. Take a mental picture of this moment and rejoice in what you see. (Psalm 16:11)

C. S. Lewis said it well: "The present is the only time in which any duty may be done or any grace received."

Gollum & Providence

by Brian Prewitt

The pop culture is still abuzz these days over *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*. I am drawn to so many different places in the story. I have read this story many times, at least once a year for the last fifteen, and yet I am always challenged and find new places for inspiration. In these last two films, I have found myself drawn to the most intriguing character in the film: Gollum.

Lord of the Rings is a hero's tale, and so we want to find our hero's in it. We want a story that delivers strength of character, perseverance over dangerous foes and impossible odds, and the triumph of the human spirit. The movie versions deliver all of that, but they do not try to escape the Christian roots of the author and the essential Christian vision that underlies the entire Trilogy. Because of this, we discover themes more powerful than a typical hero's tale.

Gollum is a model of the corruption of evil desire. In Return of the King, we witness Smeagol's transformation, from a hobbit enjoying a fishing outing with his friend, to a loathsome creature consumed by his lust for the Ring. This desire has driven him in all three films, and it is this desire that proves his undoing. There are times in The Two Towers where we think we are going to see Gollum's transformation and salvation. But Tolkien will not give us that, and in Return of the King we see Gollum's lust driving him to kill the hobbits through the most devious means he can muster. He wants the Ring, and he will have it.

The power in the story, though, comes at the end. At the trilogy's greatest moment, when Frodo stands poised ready to cast the Ring into the fires of Mount Doom, conquering evil and finishing his great quest, he fails. We do not get a classic hero's tale because we find our hero too weak to finish his mission. Instead, he wrestles for control of the Ring with an impassioned Gollum. It is Gollum who keeps Frodo from walking away with the Ring. It is Gollum who keeps Frodo near the fires, and wrestles away control of the Ring. It is Gollum who slips and falls with the Ring and falls into the fires of the mountain. It is Gollum who unwittingly saves Middle Earth.

What are we to do with an ending like this? Tolkien's trilogy was filled with so many positive images of heroism and character, why did he end it this way? Perhaps a hint comes early in Fellowship where Gandalf speaks to Frodo about Gollum. He tells Frodo that he feels Gollum has some part left to play in this adventure. It is one of the few references to a higher power in the film. Though God is never mentioned, Gandalf at least, and a few others, seem to recognize that there is some power directing the events that they are engaged in. Gandalf's suggestion of course turns out to be true, and in fact Gollum has the central role to play in the stories' end.

As Christians, we should find this relationship—Gollum's efforts in accomplishing the victory—both challenging and encouraging. Consider Gollum's actions. He was entirely given over to evil. Everything he did was for the Ring, to get possession of it and to use it for his own ends. By the end, there was no divided heart in Gollum, there was only evil. And it was the evil acts themselves that accomplished the good that motivated the heroes of the film. Without Gollum's evil acts, there would have been no victory.

There was a time in our nation's history when Christians believed enough in the idea of providence that they would name cities and roads after it. Today, I doubt most committed Christians could even give a working definition of the word. It is the notion that God is directing all things, both good and evil, towards his own ends. All things will fully and finally serve his purposes. He is Lord. He is Sovereign. He will accomplish great things because there is no force, good or evil, that can stand alongside our Almighty God.

It is in the tale of Gollum where we must confront the role of Providence in our lives. If there is Providence, then all things, including the most evil things we encounter in ourselves and in our world, will be used by God to accomplish His purposes and will be used for His glory. This, of course, does not change their essential character, and does not even mean that evil acts would go unpunished. But even when they are punished, and Gollum clearly suffered judgment at the end for his evil acts, they are still directed by God for good.

At times, I mourn the church's loss of the central role of Providence in our teachings, our devotions, our prayers, and our everyday lives. I fear it may be for us a symptom of a larger problem: a radical focus on ourselves and our individual role in our own salvation and a lesser focus on God's work. Too often, salvation is seen primarily as a result of our study, our decision to believe, and our choices that we make each and every day. Church becomes a pep rally, pumping each other up to go out and do it again for the next week. It is pattern of individualism and self-focus that feeds the pop psychology self-help market, and makes the church look much like an audience on Oprah and Dr. Phil.

Against that image is the doctrine of Providence, where we come to the table acknowledging our dependence on a sovereign Lord who is big enough to accomplish all that He desires. He is Lord of our study and our decisions, and is even capable of seeing His will done in the evil acts of a "false and tricksy hobbit," or even in the evil in you and me.

Brian Prewitt can be contacted at 4900 Providence Rd., Charlotte, NC 28226.

[brotherhood news]

BY MARK HUDSON

Hilton Head Island, SC... *Dan Collier* is the new preacher for the Church of Christ on Hilton Head Island. He and his wife, Kim, have a son and two daughters. They have lived in the Cleveland, Ohio area since 1986. There, he preached for the Westside church until 1998 and since then has had a dual ministry as counseling minister for the Amherst church and preaching minister for the Meadowlawn church in Sandusky. He has also served as a teaching and research assistant at Cleveland State and a professor of biology at Lorain Community College. His wife, Kim, has been a public high school teacher and is a special education teacher who is certified K-12 in learning disabilities. Dan began preaching for the Hilton Head Island church on June 13.

To Cry Before the Lord

by Stephen J. Walls Mathis

At a particularly difficult time in my life, my dad tried to help me by sharing his experience with learning how to lament. He was in his early thirties and had been preaching for more than 10 years when he and my mom packed up all their belongings and their three sons and headed for Meridan, Connecticut. Aside from one year in college, neither of them had ever lived outside of Texas.

That was the beginning of the darkest time in his life. Within a year and a half my mom's mother died of lung cancer, my dad's father died of a sudden heart attack, and my seven-year-old brother was hit by a car and lay in a coma for three days on the verge of death. While my dad's world was falling apart, the church was struggling with a lack of maturity among its leaders. In order to placate one prominent member, the leaders of the congregation asked Dad to resign in the fall of 1975.

That was when Dad learned how to lament. He embraced, out of necessity, the biblical language of the lament psalms to call out to God in his need. What Dad discovered, and what he tried to convey to me years later, is that it is both acceptable and sometimes necessary to cry out to God.

Hearing my dad's story and walking through my own moments of darkness has helped me to be more attentive to the presence of lament in the life of faith. As a form of literature, lament has a healthy presence in the Bible. If you were to break the book of Psalms into categories (such as hymns, thanksgiving, laments, etc.) lament psalms would be the largest set. Why? Because we live in a fallen world, a world filled with tragedy and marked by the ravages of sin. Over the past few years I have tried to incorporate two forms of lament in my own prayer life: Lament as confession and lament as a desperate cry for help.

Against You Have I Sinned

Psalm 51 is a great example of lament as confession. Responding in repentance to his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, David calls out to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned." (Psalm 51:4 NIV). Repentance and confession should not be taken lightly. When we sin, we break our covenant with the God who created us and redeemed us. James writes, "Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." (James 4:9-10 NIV)

Lament is the language of sackcloth and ashes. While I may not physically wear sackcloth, I seek to humble myself before God in my sin and shame. And lament as confession is a communal act. Because of my need for community and confession, I meet regularly with two close friends to pray and to confess. They know my sins and my weaknesses. We have been fortunate to create a safe place for our confessions and our renewal. It is vital to my life of faith. I have learned that even when my voice is weak and timid contrition is never a small thing.

It takes courage to be the first person in a relationship to confess sin, but it leads to great rewards. These relationships take time. That is why our faith communities, and even more our small groups, are so important. We need to invest in each other during the "good times" so that we can bear each others' burdens when things turn dark. It is in these safe places that we can heed James' instructions: "Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (James 5:16 NIV)

Come Quick to Save Me

The second voice of lament comes more easily than that of confession. It is the desperate cry for help when we face the dark days that come in this sinful, broken world. It could be job loss, depression, sickness or death; any number of things can throw us off balance, leaving us wounded and unsure. Unfortunately, we often hold such cries inside, afraid that our fellow Christians may not understand what we are going through or afraid somehow that it is wrong to cry out to God in anger or frustration.

Andre Resner once wrote, "God is not threatened by our questions or our cries. In fact, if we believe the Psalms and take them seriously, he invites his children to lament. And unless we can muster at least as much faith to cry out to God when life dislocates us…when wounds become opened and we think our faith will bleed to death, unless we can in such times be honest with God, we will never really be able to be honest with life again.

If true praise is to ever return to the life of the sufferer it will be through the stubborn door of lament." (Andre Resner, Jr., "The Death and Rebirth of Praise: A Journey Alongside the Lament Psalms," Abilene_Christian University Lectures, ACU Press 1993, page 38.)

God is not threatened or surprised by our cries of anger, despair or confession. You never read of God or one of his prophets correcting someone for lamenting. When the psalmist writes in Psalm 10, "Why O Lord do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" no one comes behind him to say, "You shouldn't say those things to God." No, these laments are holy scripture, God-breathed, and true to our frail, human experience.

God invites our laments, he welcomes our prayer of pain as well as our prayer of praise. He cries with us. He understands words and feelings that we ourselves cannot give expression to. More than that, God understands our pain and sorrow. Jesus is intimately familiar with our pain because he too has lived through pain and loss. He is a man of sorrows, a Savior who understands our pain. He was not afraid to cry out to God in lament (quoting Psalm 22 from the cross), and he is not afraid of our cries today. In the shadow of his cross we can give voice to our need and we can find peace.

You can contact Stephen Walls-Mathis at:
sjwmathis@pkfamily.com.

The People Business

by Ron Newberry

Ask the average church-going, pew-packing member of the church what their church is doing and you'll get a variety of answers. Their church may be developing some new programs. They may be constructing a new addition to their building. They may be in the process of acquiring more land. They may be adding a new staff member. Those are wonderful things to be doing in the church. However, we may do all those things and miss the point of our being a church.

In the 1950s, marketing expert Stanley Arnold was employed by the marketing agency Young & Rubicam. As their topnotch marketer, he was asked to develop a marketing campaign for Remington Rand, makers of men's shavers. The company was among the most conservative in America, whose chairman was retired legendary General Douglas MacArthur. Intimidated at first by a company that was such a recognized name in America, Arnold found in that phrase—in America—the inspiration for the campaign.

After thinking about it for several days, he went to the New York offices of Merril Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Beane, and placed the ultimate odd-lot order: "I want to purchase," he told the broker, "one share of every single stock listed on the New York Stock Exchange." After a vice president tried to talk him out of it, the order was finally placed. It came to more than $42,000 for one share in each of the 1098 companies listed on the Big Board at the time.

Stan now took his considerably diversified portfolio into a meeting of Remington Rand's board of directors, where he argued passionately for a sweepstakes campaign with the top prize called "A Share in America." The conservative old gentlemen shifted around in their seats and discussed the idea for a while. "But Mr. Arnold," said one, "we are not in the securities business." Another board member lamented, "We are in the shaver business."

"I agree that you are not in the securities business," said Arnold, "but I think you also ought to realize that you are not in the shaver business either. You are in the people business." The company bought the idea.

Sometimes in the church I get the impression that we believe that we are in the building business, or program business or land development business or staffing business. We're not; we're in the people business. Now, all these items may contribute to our objective of impacting people for God. However, if we do all those things well, and lose sight of people, we will have missed the point of our being a church.

Jesus didn't die for buildings, programs, staff positions or land. Jesus died for people. If he died for people, we ought to live to reach people with that good news.

Let's continue to push forward with additional programs, additional facilities and additional staff. However, let's never lose sight of the fact that these are ways or tools to reach people. Fix your eyes upon Jesus and then follow his gaze. You will find that he is looking at and searching for people.

Ron Newberry can be contacted at n2water@hotmail.com.

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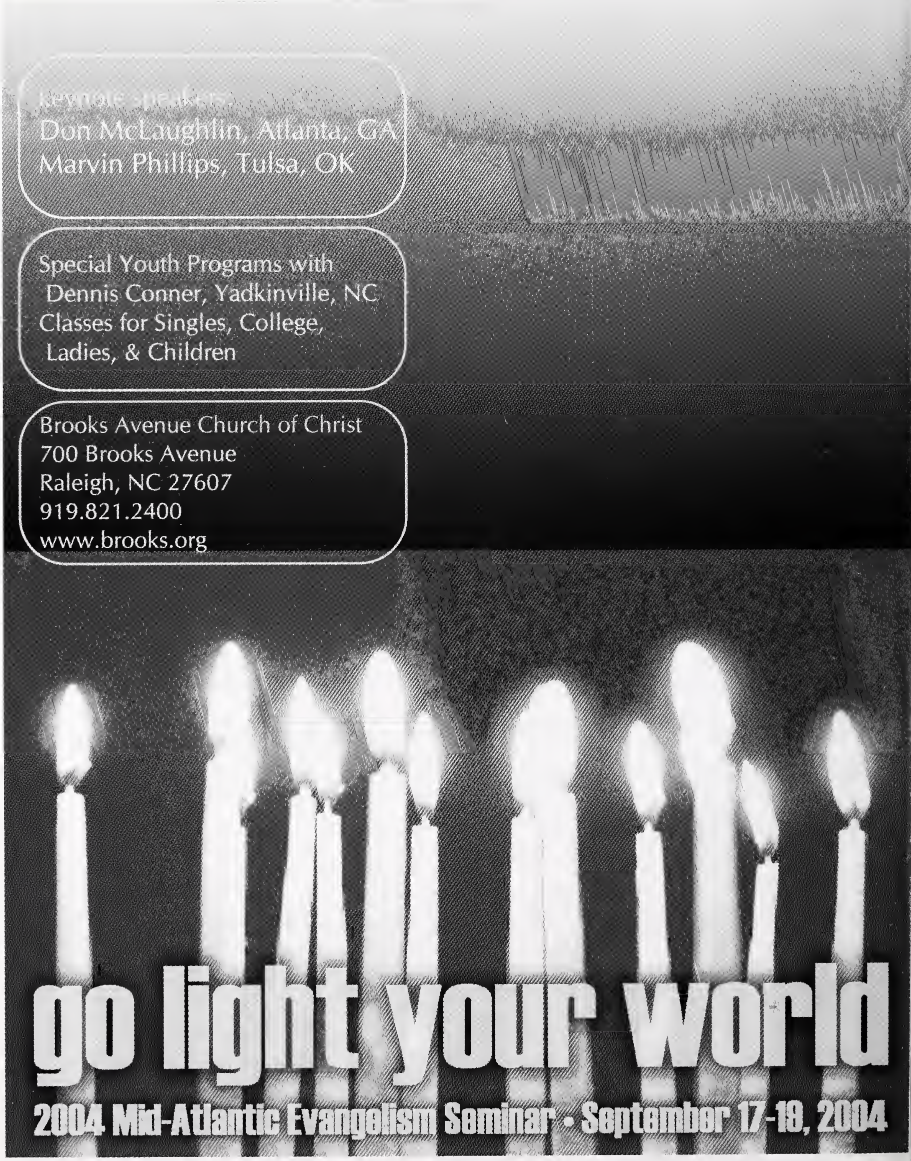
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Have You Ever Thought About...?

Questions for the Thoughtful Soul

carolina christian

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Editorial & Publication Staff
Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
Catherine Thacker, Design Editor

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Mark Hudson
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Disciples Needed

by Dennis Conner

Commenting on the current state of Christianity in America today, John MacArthur writes, "It's Christianity for consumers: Christianity Lite, the redirection, watering down, and misinterpretation of the biblical gospel in order to make it more palatable and popular. It tastes great going down and settles light," (Hard to Believe, p. 2). MacArthur's observation may sound harsh and strident, but the truth often sounds that way to those stung by it. There is a great deal of religion in America today, but little authentic discipleship. Many churches are growing, but influence on our society is declining. There are many that are recruiting new members, but far fewer that are growing biblical disciples. If there is one over arching need in the American church today, it is the need for disciples.

This desperate need is echoed by others. Respected scholar and commentator James M. Boice writes, "There is a fatal defect in the life of Christ's church in the (21st) century: a lack of true discipleship." David Watson noted in his book Called and Committed, "The vast majority of Western Christians—church members, pew sitters, hymn singers, sermon tasters—are not true disciples of Jesus. If we were willing to become disciples, the church…would be transformed and the impact on society would be staggering." Who can argue with his conclusion?

Churches in America are often little more than reflections of the culture: overweight, materialistic and self-centered. For all the professed religion in our nation, there is little influence on the culture. "Feel good" religion must be replaced with an understanding of and call to biblical discipleship.

And just what does this involve?

In Mark 1:16 Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, "Follow me." In Matthew 9:9ff Jesus approached Matthew on his job and beckoned, "Follow me." In Luke 9:23 the Lord challenged, "If anyone desires to come after me…" Do you detect a pattern here? The expression "follow me" and its equivalents occur at least 13 times in the gospels. The message is clear and unmistakable: the call to discipleship is a call to an exclusive attachment to Jesus. The call by Jesus is a call to Jesus. It is the call to follow him, to be with him, to know him. It is the call to a life that is consumed by and centered in Jesus.

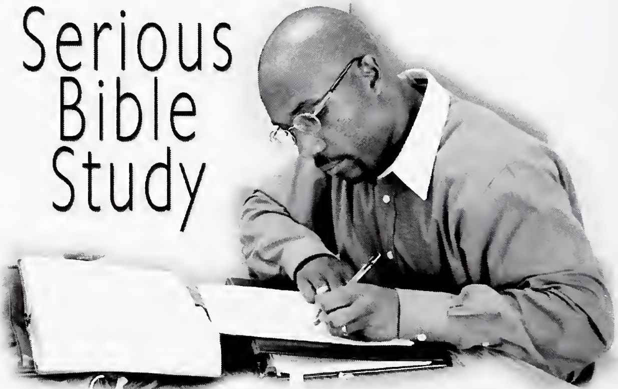
This call is not to the embracing of sectarian loyalties (Which denomination? Or which church of Christ? The one cup fellowship? The mutual-edification fellowship? The non-institutional fellowship? The "mainstream" church? And so on). Rather, the call is to follow the One sent from above.

Furthermore, the call to an exclusive attachment to Jesus is the call to a radically re-oriented lifestyle. Peter and Andrew "left their nets," (Luke says they "forsook all and followed him.")

Matthew "left all, rose up, and followed him," (Luke 5:28). For these disciples one way of life was left behind and another was pursued with a passion. To be sure, they didn't realize at this point just how radically different a turn their lives would take, but the story of their lives as told in the Scripture narratives is meant to illustrate this truth to all who would read it.

What we must realize today is that the call of Christ is a radical call. The call is not merely to be nicer people, but radically different people as we pursue his likeness in our own lives. It means that we see everything differently: our sin, our passions, our possessions, other people. It means that Jesus is not to be *a* priority in our lives, but *the* priority. The comfort of the padded pew is supplanted by the taking up of our crosses and daily death upon them. We resist the cultural call to live for ourselves and answer the biblical call to deny ourselves. Nothing about the life of discipleship is easy, but everything about it is worthwhile.

There was a time when a small band of committed disciples of Jesus Christ turned the world on its ear. If it happened once, it can happen again.



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Freedom

by Ron Newberry

The nation mourned recently the loss of the 40th President of the United States, Ronald Wilson Reagan. After a long arduous battle with Alzheimer's disease, President Reagan died at his home at age 93 with his wife by his side.

Those of us who were old enough to remember his presidency will remember his marvelous speeches in which he made you feel proud to be an American again. He made you believe in a better tomorrow and that each sunrise held greater potential for good for our great nation.

The one speech I remember most vividly was one that proved his ability to shape world opinion. It was a clear choice between the threat of communism and the virtues of democracy. He stood at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin on June 12, 1987 and called on the citizens of the communist regimes to embrace freedom and democracy. He said in part that day:

"Behind me stands a wall that encircles the free sectors of this city, part of a vast system of barriers that divides the entire continent of Europe. From the Baltic, south, those barriers cut across Germany in a gash of barbed wire, concrete, dog runs, and guard towers...Today I say: As long as this gate is closed, as long as this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not the German question alone that remains open, but the question of freedom for all mankind," Reagan added. *"Yet I do not come here to lament. For I find in Berlin a message of hope, even in the shadow of this wall, a message of triumph."*

Reagan believed that in some small incremental ways the Soviet Union was coming to appreciate the importance of freedom, but he wondered whether the efforts of the Soviet Union were real changes or cosmetic gestures. Then, there was that one moment, the moment of a generation and beyond, that lit the torch of democratic dreams for Eastern Europe and the world. Reagan said:

"There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Merely two years later, the dream became a reality. Sledge hammers were seen and heard pounding the wall chipping away at the years of oppression and isolation for East Germany. But there was more than a wall that divided a city and a country that was coming down. Communism in the "evil empire" was finished.

Countries that had known only tyranny under the Soviet's iron fence behind the iron curtain would soon feel the elation of freedom. Reagan accomplished what had been perceived to be impossible by holding convictions and flexing America's muscle to advance those convictions. The cold war was won without firing a shot!

President Reagan believed in freedom, and he was thoroughly convinced that if the words of freedom could reach the hearts and minds of those under tyranny, freedom would ultimate win the day.

The belief that freedom will succeed when understood is the hope of the gospel as well. God has always been in the business of tearing down walls. The torch of freedom that was ignited almost two thousand years ago burns brightly today. Satan's evil empire is finished. We wait for the final blows that will ultimately bring down the wall between eternity and us. Between now and then, as long as we live, may we live optimistic lives advancing the good news that good at the end of the day wins over evil and there is always a bright, hopeful tomorrow because of God's grace.

A Questionable Theme

Editor's Note: The term used today is "seekers." People have questions and they are seeking answers. Nothing is sacred anymore; everything is open to questioning. And people today have lots of questions! Consequently the question for the church is: are we prepared to provide them with answers that make sense? In this issue of *Carolina Christian* we focus on some of the vital questions non-Christians are concerned with today. Obviously, there are many more questions for people seeking faith ("Have You Ever Thought About, volume 2 will appear early next year), but here we attempt to deal with just a few that have been and often are on the minds of Christians and seekers alike. These articles are adapted from a sermon series recently preached by the editor. They are by no means exhaustive treatments of the various questions, but are intended to provide stimulation for further thought and exploration. Our hope and prayer is that the Spirit of God will use them to strengthen our faith as believers and lead to faith those who are seeking a better way.

Have You Ever Thought About the Meaning of Faith?

by Dennis Conner

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31)

I remember watching as a teen an episode from the classic 70’s TV series *All in the Family* that was highlighted by a conversation on the nature of faith between Archie Bunker and his atheist son-in-law Mike. When asked the question, “What is faith?” Archie replied, “Faith is when you believe something that nobody in his right mind would believe!” Unfortunately, that is an understanding of faith that is shared by many Christians today. To many people in and out of the church, faith has little if anything to do with knowledge. Faith and facts are incompatible. As more than one friend—both in and out of the church—has put it to me, “Well, I guess you’ve just got to take it by faith. You’ve just got to take a leap and believe it.”

Gregory Koukl is correct in his assessment of this dominant, but misunderstood, view of faith: “‘Faith’ in this twisted sense is what you use when all reason is against you. It’s religious wishful thinking, in which one squeezes out spiritual hope by intense acts of sheer will. People of ‘faith’ believe the impossible. People of ‘faith’ believe that which is contrary to fact. People of ‘faith’ believe that which is contrary to evidence. People of ‘faith’ ignore reality.”

Is Archie right, or does Scripture define faith differently? Is faith just a blind leap? If so, then I could just as easily, and justifiably, believe in purple polka-dotted elephants on the dark side of the moon! It gives me comfort to talk to them and calms my fears to believe that they are always watching over me!

Is believing in Jesus Christ the same as believing in purple polka-dotted elephants?

We Believe Because

Shortly after graduating from college, and just before beginning a life in ministry to the church, I went through a crisis of faith. It centered in the historicity of Jesus and the resurrection and the validity of his claims. What if he wasn’t who he claimed to be? What if he was the mythical embellishment of the early Christian community, much like King Arthur? How could I be sure for myself? What else could I do for a career? I certainly couldn’t take money from a church if I wasn’t even sure myself about Jesus. What ensued was an intense, very personal search for the truth.

Today I am still a Christian, and I am Christian because there are very compelling reasons to be!

What made the difference for me was the New Testament dependence upon eyewitness testimony. John said the things he recorded were recorded for one fundamental reason: to lead his readers to faith in Jesus as the Christ. John went on to affirm his eyewitness testimony of the things he wrote about concerning Jesus: "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true," (John 21:24).

Very similar language can be found in what we have today as John's first epistle, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—his we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it...We proclaim that which we have seen and heard," (1 John 1:1-3). John's fervent appeal to the sensory perceptions (touch, hearing, sight) that comprised the disciples' first hand witness to the Word of life (Jesus as the logos of God who gives life) cannot be lightly dismissed.

> Christian faith is not the denial of reality

Then there is Peter's word of encouragement to Christians experiencing the double-edged sword of persecution and false teaching, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty," (2 Peter 1:16).

Someone may counter with the studies and court cases in recent years that have undermined the value of eyewitness testimony in courts of law. However, in this article we are not talking about startled and unprepared bystanders who witnessed an act that happened in a flash, in a moment. Rather, we are considering the testimony of those who over an extended period of time witnessed the actions and enjoyed the close association of a single individual.

Based on these texts, then, we may define biblical faith as "belief based on reliable testimony." Biblical faith is not belief *in spite* of the evidence, but *because* of the evidence. As much as I might want to, there really is no compelling reason to believe in purple polka dotted elephants on the dark side of the moon!

Because We Believe, We Trust

But faith is more than just believing certain things about God and Jesus. It is more than intellectual agreement to certain facts. It's taking your life and putting it on the line based on your confidence in those facts. Faith is trust in the one who is the object of our belief.

Blondin was a famous French tightrope walker and acrobat who lived from 1824-1897. His greatest fame came in 1859 when for the first time he walked a 1100 foot tightrope suspended 160 feet above the waters of Niagra Falls. Blondin went on to walk across the falls several times, each with a different theatrical flare. On one such high-wire walk Blondin crossed over the falls pushing a wheelbarrow. The crowd cheered! When he reached the other side he asked the spectators if they believed he could do it again. Everyone cheered their affirmation! Blondin then asked if they believed he could again cross the tightrope with someone in the wheelbarrow. Everyone cheered believing that he could do it, wanting to see this incredible stunt. Blondin then asked for a volunteer to ride in the wheelbarrow. No one stepped forward.

Now we're talking about a whole different aspect of faith! The first is an intellectual belief, an acknowledgment of certain facts. The second is active faith, converting your knowledge to action. When you climb into the wheelbarrow, your belief in facts is converted into active trust.

Biblical faith is more than assent to certain facts we accept as true. It is the willingness to entrust my well being to the one who is the object of my belief. It is the willingness to trust the God who has promised that he will never leave me and that one day I will be with him forever. It is the willingness to trust what Jesus accomplished on the cross as the ground of my salvation.

Because We Trust, We Obey

Pious professions, no matter how loud or enthusiastically we proclaim them, will simply not suffice as real faith. Professions of faith must be manifested in obedience. Jesus once challenged, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). Obedience is the fruit of faith. It is the acid test, the point of contact between the rubber and the road! Obedience is not about earning salvation; it is about living your faith.

Christian faith is not the denial of reality. As I once read somewhere, biblical Christians don't deny reality, they discover the ultimate reality. Christians embrace the sure reality of the things of God, and once they've discovered it, they act on what they have good reason to believe is true.

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Have You Ever Thought About the Nature of Truth?

by Dennis Conner

It is a scene for the ages, and it is certainly a scene that engages the question of the ages. The Roman governor, Pilate, is convinced of Jesus' innocence, but the Jewish leaders and the rabble outside the hall are just as convinced of his guilt. Nothing seems to make any sense to the governor; certainly not the present dilemma from which he seems unable to extricate himself. In response to Pilate's question. "Are you a king," Jesus answers. "I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth." That in turn leads to Pilate's provocative question. "What is truth?" (John 18:38).

I don't think Pilate was mocking Jesus. Instead, I believe he was genuinely perplexed and confused, as are so many today. Here he is, seemingly in possession of everything the world offers and a man would desire wealth, power, position, status and yet he is no closer to understanding the world around him and the true nature of things than the simplest peasant under his rule. He has had access to a privileged education and the courts of the emperor; yet, truth eludes him. And in reality, is Pilate really much different from anyone else today?

How do we know what is really true? What can we depend upon? What is worth living for? Or dying for? Indeed, can we know what is really true? And as regards truth, there are other questions we must ask. Who owns the truth? Are Christians the exclusive carriers of truth? Or do non-Christians also have access to theological truths? Is the Bible the sole source of truth? Or can one find theological truths within non-Christian materials? These are all very important questions, obviously. Along with Pilate we want to know: just what is truth?

At this point, we need to deal with a popular myth: the myth of relativism. A recent Barna Research Group survey on what Americans believe asked the question, "Is there absolute Truth?" Sixty-six percent of adults responded that they believe that "there is no such thing as absolute truth; different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct." Seventy-two percent of those aged 18 to 25 expressed this belief. In other words, the dominant view is that truth is relative: what is true for you may not be true for me. Oddly enough, if you were to ask those who claim that there is no such thing as absolute truth if they believe that with all their hearts—if they believe this with certainty—then they have just expressed an absolute truth!

The truth is, no one believes absolutely that truth is relative! Even among those who believe that there are no absolute truths, they will almost universally express disgust and outrage when a child is molested by a parent or other adult. Why? Because they believe it is absolutely wrong! They will never speak approvingly of the senseless murder of an innocent victim.

Why? Because they believe that murder is absolutely wrong! Relativism is a popular myth, but a myth nonetheless. J. P. Moreland, in his book *Apologetic Reasoning and the Christian Mind*, tells of an experience that illustrates the inconsistency of relativism and the importance of truth:

"One afternoon I was sharing the gospel in a student's dorm room at the University of Vermont. The student began to espouse ethical relativism: 'Whatever is true for you is true for you and whatever is true for me is true for me. . . . But no one should force his or her views on other people since everything is relative.' I thanked the student for his time and began to leave his room. On the way out, I picked up his small stereo and started out the door with it. 'Hey, what are you doing?' he shouted. . . . 'I am leaving your room with your stereo.' 'You can't do that,' he gushed." But Moreland said, "I happen to think it is permissible to steal stereos if it will help a person's religious devotions, and I myself could use a stereo to listen to Christian music in my morning devotions. Now I would never try to force you to accept my moral beliefs in this regard because, as you said, everything is relative and we shouldn't force our ideas on others. But surely you aren't going to force on me your belief that it is wrong to steal your stereo, are you?" Moreland looked at him and continued: "You know what I think? I think that you espouse relativism in areas of your life where it's convenient , say in sexual morality, or in areas about which you do not care, but when it comes to someone stealing your stereo or criticizing your own moral hobbyhorses, I suspect that you become a moral absolutist pretty quickly, don't you?" The story has a happy ending, for Moreland says, "Believe it or not, the student honestly saw the inconsistency of his behavior and, a few weeks later, I was able to lead him to Jesus Christ."

Ok, so maybe there are some things that are always true for all people everywhere. Where do we find that truth? Is there a source that can be trusted? Or do we find bits of truth here and bits of truth there?

Let's begin dealing with these questions by looking at an encounter between Paul and some worldly philosophers that is recorded Acts 17:16-34. Paul is in Athens and is distressed by the many idols he find there. After speaking with Jews and "God-fearing" Greeks in the synagogue he then took to the streets of the marketplace preaching the gospel of Christ and the resurrection. Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who heard Paul took issue with him and took him to speak before a meeting at the Areopagus.

There, Paul began his message by finding points of agreement with his secular audience. "I see that in every way you are very religious!" (Acts 17: 22). So was he. They had an altar to an Unknown God. Paul knew this God and wanted to tell them about him. From this point went on to declare the nature of this great God! Reaching the climactic point of the message Paul proclaimed, "For in him we live and move and have our being," (v. 28a). Then, taking full advantage of the point of agreement between himself and his secular audience, he draws them in by pointing out, "As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring,'" (v. 28b).

Did Paul use Scripture as the source of "truth" in his speech at the Areopagus? No Paul used Athenian poets to describe the creative nature of God. Non-Christian poets as a source of theological truth! Matt Rindge observes in an article entitled Truth: Can It be Found Outside of Christianity, "Paul doesn't see himself as one who brings truth to a people who have none. He helps the Athenians recognize elements of truth already present in their culture. He goes on to share new points of truth with them, but that is quite different from assuming they have no truth at all."

Is this to suggest that we cannot depend upon Christian Scripture for truth? Or that the Christian faith cannot be trusted? Not at all. It is to say that all that is true comes from God, regardless of where we find it! Nor is this to suggest that everything we are told by other world systems regarding God is true, because many of the world religions and systems often present conflicting views of God and truth. So, how do we know what is true? Can we know it or not? Is there a knowable truth that we can trust? To attempt an answer to these questions, let's go back to that scene in Pilate's hall.

Jesus stands before Pilate. On another occasion Jesus has said of himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," (John 14:6). Notice that Jesus didn't say " I have...the truth." He said, " I am...the truth." Regarding this assertion author and theologian Stephen Neill has noted, "This does not mean that Jesus was stating a number of good and true ideas. It means that in him the total structure, the inmost reality, of the universe was for the first time and forever disclosed." Jesus Himself is the very embodiment of all that is true about God.

When Phillip requested of the Lord, "Show us the Father," Jesus responded by informing him, "He that has seen me has seen the Father." An insight from commentator William Barclay is helpful here, "Jesus is the expression of the mind of God. It is as if John said to the Greeks: 'For the last six centuries you have been speaking about the mind of God in the universe. If you want to see what the mind of God is, look at Jesus Christ. Here, full-displayed, is that mind of God about which you have always been thinking and talking. The logos has become flesh. The mind of God has become a person.'"

What does this have to do with Pilate's question? Just this: the answer to his question was standing right in front of him! In the person, work and teaching of Jesus Christ we find all the truth we need for life's greatest questions. Jesus gives meaning to the questions of why morals? Why love? What is worth living for? What is worth dying for? And how can I know God personally? In fact, if you want to know what God is like-if you want to know his heart, his desire, his character-we need only look to Jesus. Jesus is the very embodiment of the truth and heart of God. Christ himself is the personification of truth.

If Jesus is the very revelation of the truth and heart of God, then we can trust the things he has to say to the world. On once occasion Jesus said, "The words which I have spoken to you are spirit and are life," (John 6:6). In the words of Jesus, preserved for us today in holy Scripture, we find all the truth we need to be equipped for life in this world, and the next.

What is truth? Truth is Jesus.

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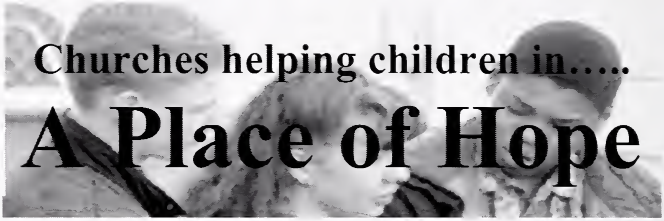
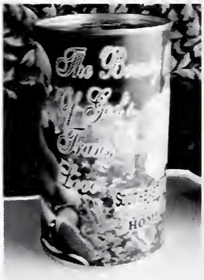


Churches helping children in.....

A Place of Hope

It's traditional among churches of Christ in the Carolinas and the Southeast to help hurting and needy children by partnering with Southeastern Children's Home. Two of our annual campaigns with churches are coming up in the fall.

Change for Children



Change cans and promotional materials will be shipped to churches on August 1st in order to kick off the campaign on August 15th. The Change for Children campaign will be completed on October 23rd this year.

Astra
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Quilted Northern

Super Sac Sunday

The date for the fall Super Sac Sunday is September 12th. Promotional materials will be sent to churches on August 15th to prepare the congregation for the collection.

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Robert C. Kimberly, Executive Director
PO Box 339 115 Children's Way
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Have You Ever Thought About

the Problem of Evil & Suffering?

by Dennis Conner

In Genesis 1:31 the biblical story of the world's beginning says that when God had finished with creation, he "saw all that he had made, and it was very good." That was then, this is now. We look around us and we see a world beset by trouble and woe. We see evil flourishing in virtually ever corner of the planet. We see innocent men, women and children suffering at the hands of tyrants and religious fanatics. The century just completed was to have been a golden age for the advancement of man. Science virtually promised it. Instead, the 20th century was the bloodiest, most war-riddled century in the history of humanity. The pages of this edition could not even begin to contain the litany of evil and suffering wrought by humans upon their fellow humans.

Then, there is the seemingly indiscriminate suffering that afflicts so many other lives on a less spectacular basis. A lovely Christian mother with two beautiful children and a devoted husband is stricken with cancer in the prime of her life and soon succumbs to the disease. A beautiful son with a bright future has his life snuffed out by a drunken driver, and the drunk survives. All around us we see bad things happening to good people. And every time it happens, we struggle to make sense of any of it.

It may very well be that the greatest stumbling block to faith for non-Christians is the "problem of evil." How do we reconcile all the evil and suffering in the world with the concept of a good, loving and powerful God? If God is loving, why doesn't he keep people from being treated so unjustly and from suffering so needlessly? If God could stop the evil and just doesn't want to, then he isn't loving. And if God is so powerful, why doesn't he stamp out all the evil and prevent bad things from happening to people? If God wants to stop the evil in the world, and can't, then he must not be all powerful. Where is God when evil happens?

These are honest questions that require honest and sensitive answers. How can we as Christians speak to this troubling question of evil and suffering?

Not Just a Christian Problem

The problem of evil and suffering is not just a problem for those of Jewish/Christian faith. It is a problem for those of non-biblical belief and philosophical systems as well. While the problem of evil and suffering is often directed at Christians, demanding a defense of the Christian God, intellectual honesty demands that other systems also offer an answer. Why is it that we don't hear of people demanding from atheists their explanation of and answer to the problem of evil? If the existence of evil makes it difficult for some people to believe in God, then they should also seek an answer from the alternative to God: atheism. And how would—could—atheism answer? Listen to this response from an avowed atheist following the evil of September 11: *"September 11 was harder for an atheist like myself than for a believer because it shook my belief in the one last remaining vestige of everything, the foundation of everything in the human race, in the human species, and in everything that I had been about, namely, trying to make some small contribution towards improving its condition...That does leave you very, very isolated. Not knowing where to turn enormously reduces the scale of expectations...That's a spiritual crisis. But it's not one involving God. I don't begin to doubt even my own lack of faith because of it. It's a sense of sinking into an abyss in which you can't hold on to anything in the world... When you see human behavior like this, for me, it just reconfirms my atheism... I'm not proud of it. It's just a view of the world. It's just the way I am. I can't make meaning of the world otherwise. But I certainly couldn't make meaning of the world through some notion of God after a horror like that...It just affirms that hopelessness."* (Kanan Makiya, A professor of Middle Eastern studies at Brandeis University)

Do you hear what he's saying? He says that he doesn't see anyway to reconcile belief in God with the existence of evil. But then he says, neither does atheism have any answers! The only thing atheism can say is, "It's all hopeless and meaningless. And that's just the way it is." At least he's honest about it.

But is it possible to reconcile belief in God with the existence of evil and suffering? I believe it is.

The Fall of Man and the Ruinous Effect of Sin

God created us with free will; with the ability to make choices between varying alternatives. Humans were created with the freedom to choose to love God; however, that also necessarily means that humans can also choose to reject God and act in unloving ways. Otherwise, we would be little more than robots with no ability to choose, and that may be viewed as an evil in itself.

When the first people exercised their will to go against God (you may read the story for yourself in Genesis 3), the effects were felt in all creation. Not just Adam and Eve were effected in terms of their relationship with God; all the created order suffered. A whole new realm of possibilities was ushered into human experience; the possibility for evil. We see that possibility lived out in Cain's murder of his brother, Abel. And the world has been suffering ever since.

The Genesis story implies very strongly that there is another party present there in Eden: Satan. Satan is not the serpent, but the serpent is representative of the voice of Satan. He has a vested interest in evil. Moral evil, for him, is the way of overthrowing the rule of God in the world. If he can wreak enough havoc, foster enough disappointment and disillusionment, then perhaps he can get people to question God and turn away.

Ok. Maybe that helps to explain the presence of evil in the world. But it doesn't tell us why God doesn't do something if in fact he is so loving and good and powerful! The truth is, God has done something, and there is something that he will yet do.

The Answer to Evil is the Cross

It is an irony that only divine genius could have conceived: an act of unfathomable hatred and evil is itself the ultimate answer to the dilemma of human suffering and evil. In the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, God has expressed his solidarity with the human condition. John Stott, in his great book, *The Cross of Christ,* writes: *"I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. . . . In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering."*

In the cross of Jesus Christ, God himself has entered into our suffering, exposing himself to moral evil. In the cross Jesus as God-in-the-flesh allows himself to be the object of evil and suffering and injustice. And in the cross, we see the hope for eternal vindication and righteousness. The cross is not a simplistic, "pat" answer to the problem of evil and suffering. It is the declaration of God's oneness with his creation, even in its worst moments.

There is no question that evil poses a difficulty for both people of faith and seekers of faith, but do you really want to embrace the alternative? The truth is, though there is suffering and injustice in the world, faith in the living Christ offers the only viable possibility for hope.

Have You Ever Thought About Why You're Here?

by Dennis Conner

What should I do with my life? What's really important in life? What is it going to take for me to be happy in life? These are questions that are asked with a more than casual interest in their answers. The answers to these questions will determine the direction and very substance of our lives.

In his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren offers this simple but defining principle for determining the meaning of your life: *it's not about you!* In trying to answer the question of meaning and purpose we typically begin at the wrong starting point—ourselves. To focus on ourselves means that the pursuit is self-centered, which in turn means that the search for meaning is compromised before it begins! Jeremiah reminds us that "the heart is a deceitful thing; who can know it?" We don't know ourselves as well as we think we do. Looking within can only add to the confusion.

To be sure, there is no lack to the number of books suggesting ways to discover the purpose of my life. You can find them in the "Self-Help" section of any bookstore. They are typically only variations of a theme, focusing on the development of the power that is within us and the attainment of some kind of success. However, being successful and fulfilling life's purpose are not necessarily the same thing. You can reach all your goals, become an undeniable success by all the world's standards, and still be left empty. Recently I heard a lady who has everything say, "I've got to find something to give some meaning to my life."

I've been reading a book that says, in essence, that self help is no help at all. In fact, it says, self-sacrifice is the true way to finding yourself. If I may quote, it says, "...He that will lose his life...shall find it." It's the Bible.

If we buy into the assertion that we are here by a special creative act, versus the incredible leap of faith taken by atheistic scientists, then it would follow that the Creator understands the creation better than the creation understands itself. To begin to answer the question of meaning we must look not within ourselves, but outside ourselves to the Creator. Bertrand Russell, the famous atheist, might not have been a believer in God, but at least he was honest. Even Russell acknowledged once, "Unless you assume a God, the question of life's purpose is meaningless." Russell would have concluded, then, that since there is no God, there is no real purpose in life.

Indeed, some would say, "That's right." Listen to this essay appearing on a website I came across recently: "The question (regarding purpose in life, DC) is a very good one. However, it implies—by the very fact that it is asked—that there is a purpose for our existence, and that we need to find out what that purpose is. But why should we assume that there is a purpose? It seems to be a common assumption, especially among believers in God or the 'supernatural,' that everything happens or exists for a purpose. But there is no demonstrable basis for such an assumption. Many things exist without any purpose. For example, if I find a hundred-dollar bill in the street, I don't ask 'What is the purpose of this money?' It is the purest accident that it is there. I may (assuming there is no way to find its owner) create a 'purpose' for it, by spending it, but that purpose is merely one that I have assigned to it myself, not any purpose that was inherent in it, or that had anything to do with its lying there on the street...What is the purpose of the whale, or the tulip, or the eagle, or the mountain? Some parts of nature we humans can make some use of, even if only to admire them for their beauty, their power, their complexity, or their mystery. But that use or admiration is only something that is the product of our own minds, and does not reflect any inherent 'purpose.' They simply exist, and (for living things) they exist simply for the purpose of existing. And I am no different. I also exist, and that is also my purpose: to exist.

In one sense, all living things have a purpose which is built into their genes: to exist, to survive as long as possible, and to reproduce their kind if possible. For us humans, we also want to make our existence as pleasant and painless as possible, which implies (since we are social animals) getting along with others of our kind. All moral codes developed by human beings are attempts to guide us in doing that," (Richard Packam).

There are several flaws in his reasoning. First of all, the $100 bill he talks about does have a purpose. In fact, it was created for a purpose. It was conceived and created for the purpose of purchasing a determined value of product or services. By spending the money, he is not creating a purpose for it; rather, he is determining how the purpose for which the bill was created shall be carried out. The bill was created to be spent and he is merely determining how it will be spent. The purpose for the bill was determined by those who created it, not by the one spending it.

Further, if we are each left to create our own purpose in life (as one might create a purpose for the $100 bill), then what if someone decides that his purpose in life is to do away with others who do not, in his estimation, have value or worth as human beings? For instance, what if a political leader decides that there is an entire race of people who serve no useful purpose on this earth, and that his purpose is to eradicate them? Why shouldn't he? Why shouldn't Hitler have ruthlessly exterminated 6,000,000 Jews? Why shouldn't Stalin have wiped out 20,000,000 (by modest estimates) of those he deemed unfit for the purposes of the state? If there is no divinely determined purpose for this life, and each is left to determine his own purpose, then how can anyone say that one purpose is right and another is wrong? And then he argues in the final analysis that there is a purpose in life (after he had just argued that there is no definite purpose), and that purpose is just to exist. Well, that's a big part of the problem in our society. People are doing just that existing. They step on people and use people so they can exist in a better lifestyle. They crush others and take advantage of others so they can take another step up the rung of the existence ladder. And then, when they reach a certain vantage point, they realize that there must be more to life than just existing. And indeed, there is. The only other option is that of the divine Creator. So then, how do we discover the purpose we were created for? Fortunately, God hasn't left us clueless and in the dark. In fact, there was a man who wrote an entire book in the Bible dedicated to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" The book is Ecclesiastes.

In it, the preacher (Solomon) shares his observations about the different avenues that man travels in the pursuit of meaning (wealth, pleasure, stimulants, power, work). He observes, time and time again, that when man is left to himself in the pursuit of the question of meaning, the result is injustice, oppression and senselessness. Finally, in Ecclesiastes 12:13, he shares his conclusion after a lifetime of observing the world around him and man's empty pursuit of purpose in a life that is devoid of God. He says, "Here is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is the duty of every person." In other words, man was created for this purpose: to live life in relationship with his/her Creator. To live life in a way that we were not created for is to invite emptiness, chaos, and even destruction. We were created for the purpose of living for God, not for ourselves.

This, then, is the truest happiness: to live in pursuit of God's purpose for my life.

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Have You Ever Thought About
Why Church?

by Dennis Conner

In 2002 the Gallup Index of Leading Religious Indicators reached its lowest level, demonstrating the public's most negative overall rating for organized religion since the index began in 1940.The index is based on eight measurements of the religious beliefs and practices of Americans. A perfect score would be 1,000. The 2002 figure was 641, a 30-point drop from the 2001 figure of 671, according to the Religion News Service (January, 2003).

The poll also found that confidence in organized religion had declined sharply. In 2002, only 45 percent of Americans said they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in organized religion, compared to 60 percent in 2001.

The index reached its peak score of 741 in 1956. Since then, America's perception of "organized religion" has been in steady decline, with some occasional exceptions. A number of factors may account for this. The cultural revolution of the 1960's, with its radical shift in values and morals and rebellion against establishment authority, has surely been a factor. The TV evangelists' scandals of the '80's and early 90's was surely another negative influence on public perception. The growing tolerance for alternative worldviews (pluralism) and the shift away from absolute truths have also been factors. And then, there are the tragic failures of the church to be what Christ has called it to be, which have had the effect of undermining the church's integrity and turning people off with its hypocrisy.

It's quite common for believers to have conversations with people who are suspicious of the value and relevancy of "organized religion," or church. It's not uncommon these days to hear comments like, "I have no problem with Christ. What I have a problem with is the church (organized religion)."

Can you have Christ without His church? Is the church a dispensable element of Christian faith? Why does anyone need the church?

Jesus and Organized Religion

It would likely come as a surprise to many that Jesus had his own issues with the "organized religion" of his day. Religious leaders in Jesus' time had taken the faith of God and turned it into a rigid system of rules and regulations in which performance was more important than people. Ritual had replaced righteousness, institutionalism was substituted for relationship, and tradition had supplanted truth. Many were more concerned with protecting the institution than with seeking the will of God. Jesus was stern and uncompromising in his rebuke of these religionists, referring to them as "white tombs full of the stench of death," "hypocrites," and "blind guides," among other things (Matthew 23). For his opposition to their perversion of the way of God, they killed him.

Many today have had bad church experiences or know others who have had them. They know the rigidness, judgmentalism, traditionalism, intolerance and hypocrisy that are too often characteristic of Christian congregations. They equate "church" with "organized religion" and reject both because of the negatives they see, or perceive.

However, the biblical concept of the church is a far cry from "organized religion." The word in the original Greek text that is often translated into the English word "church" literally means "the called out." It refers to a group of people who, by the grace of God, have been called out of sin and the world into a relationship with the living Christ. These "called out ones" form a faith community in which believers live in vital relationship with Christ and one another. "Church" is not about "organization." It is about relationship. Church is not about an institution. It is about a spiritual family.

I suppose we now need to ask: is the church an option? Is it possible to have Christ without involvement in the church? My initial response would be that it was never an option in the mind of Jesus himself. In our text, he makes it clear that the church was his idea, not ours. It was Jesus' intention to call a group of to himself who would be gathered around the common confession of his Sonship. When Jesus said, "and upon this rock I will build my church," he was talking about the confession Peter had just uttered in v. 16. Now, if Jesus saw the church as an integral component of faith in himself, how can we presume that it is an option, or altogether dispensable?

Got Christ, Got Church

In Ephesians 1:22-23 Paul uses the metaphor of the body to emphasize the nature and necessity of the church. Christ is the head of all things pertaining to the church, and the church is the body of Christ. Is the church necessary? That can be answered with another question: can you imagine a head without a body or a body without a head as a natural expression of life? So it is with the church. Christ without the church is as unnatural as a head without a body. The church as body is to carry out the will of Christ—the head—in the world.

Another relevant text on this point is Eph. 3:10-11: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." Here Paul asserts two things: (1) It was God's intent that his wisdom in the redemption of humankind would be made known to the world through the church, and (2) This intent was a part of God's eternal purpose which was accomplished in the redemptive work of Christ.

What this means is that the church is an integral part of the accomplishment of God's eternal purpose in Christ. It was not an afterthought, nor is it an option. God has always determined that the church would play a key role in his redemptive purposes. So, you tell me: does this sound like the church is dispensable to faith in Christ? Or does it sound indispensable?

Created For Community

The story of beginnings in Genesis tells us that God said, "Let us make man in our image," (Genesis1:26). The Godhead (the Trinity) is a self-contained community. When the first man was created, God then saw that it was not good for him to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Loneliness has never been healthy for people. So, God created a companion, and man has been living in community ever since.

We see the value of the church when we recognize that as human beings, we were created for community. We were meant to live in relationship with others. We were not meant to live our lives in isolation from others. Everything about our lives acknowledges this truth. We are raised in families. We live in a society. We experience loneliness when our need for community is not met.

The church is just that, a community. It is a community of faith in which people live in fellowship with other people of faith. It is a community in which our faith is to be shared, nurtured, disciplined, and grown. The church, then, is one way in which our need for community is met (Romans 12:5, "...so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others," emphasis DC).

Alan Crandall correctly observes, "Salvation manifests itself in community. Sin wants us alone, turned in upon ourselves. God wants us for himself and others. Salvation is a deliverance from selfish individualism to a supernatural new order of redeemed personal relationships," (*Evangelica*, January, 1983). The church is the most natural expression of redeemed personal relationships.

The Church as the Incarnation of Christ

Further, the church is to be the embodiment of Christ on earth, carrying on the mission and ministry of Christ himself. Indeed, it is to be Jesus to the world. The church is to manifest in flesh—in the lives of its people individually and in its corporate life—the heart and life of Christ. It is to have his heart, being moved by compassion to be his hands, reaching out to care for those whose lives have been devastated by sin. As was Jesus, the church of Jesus is to be an instrument of grace bringing hope to the disillusioned of every strata of society.

Perhaps the failure of many congregations to live up this expectation is one reason so many have been turned off by the church. Rather than being Jesus to people, the church has sometimes become bogged down in sectarian fighting and squabbling, petty politics, and worldly attitudes, leaving people to wonder, "Why bother?" But on the other hand, when the church seriously attempts to live up to its calling, the results are glorious for God. The poor are cared for, the broken are mended, the hurting are healed, the loveless are loved, and the wanderers find a place to belong. When the church is being authentically Christlike, the world is blessed beyond measure. In Wheat That Springeth Green, author J. F. Powers has one of his characters say, "This is a big old ship, Bill. She creaks, she rocks, she rolls, and at times she makes you want to throw up. But she gets where she's going. Always has, always will, until the end of time. With or without you." It's also an apt description of the church. It isn't perfect, but it's the way God has chosen to get his people from here (this world) to there (heaven). And the church will get there, with or without you. God prefers that it be with you!

[trends of interest]

Viewing of Internet Pornography on the Increase

N2h2, a global Internet content filtering company, reports that the number of commercial pornography web pages on the Internet has increased by nearly 1,800 percent compared with five years ago. The company has identified over 260 million pages classified as pornography. There is some good news related to internet activity. More than a third of Christians in America with access to the internet have used the web to access religious information.

Half of Young People Will Contract STD's

A recent study released by the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI) says that by age 25 half of all American youth will have contracted a sexually transmitted disease. The report was published in Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health. The data used in the study came from the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2000 approximately 18.9 million new STD infections were reported to the CDC. Of that number, 9.1 million were found in young people ages 15 to 24. The AGI recommended more condoms and safe-sex training for youth, which comes as no surprise since the organization was originally created as part of Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Pro-family groups around the nation continue to promote abstinence as the only sure prevention of STD's.

ByHeart

by Kent Massey

The mind is an amazing thing! It's amazing what kind of stuff stays stored on the hard drive of your mind. For instance, I can still remember the phone number of my first girl friend (after 25 years), but I cannot for the life of me remember the fax number at my office. I can still sing all the words to "Granny's in the Cellar, O Lordy Can't You Smell Her?" but I cannot recall the name of my wife's cousin in Kentucky. I know the starting date of my first job, but I struggle with remembering my brother's birthday.

The mind is a wonderful and powerful tool! And scientists have discovered that it is during our baby years and early childhood that we learn the most. That is why parents are encouraged to have their children begin learning a second language between ages 2-4. Or to start music lessons before the age of seven. Young minds are truly sharp and impressionable.

> "The heart is an open vessel and you must decide what to fill it with"

I remember as a kid my Sunday school memorization drills. Remember the words "Draw your swords"? And you lifted your Bible like a spear? And you anxiously awaited the word "Charge,"and then competed to see who could find the verse the quickest. What about the "Golden Text?" It was the weekly Bible verse that you had to know in order to get your jewels for your Sunday school crown that was hung on the flannel board in the classroom.

Bible memorization was an integral part of Sunday school curriculum. And the words have stuck with me to this day.

Yet this type of learning has fallen out of favor with professional educators who argue that children do not understand much of what they commit to memory; that the words are just taken in, with no thought of their meaning or application. But we all memorize something. The only question is, what will it be?

Maybe that is why God instructed the children of Israel with these words in Deuteronomy 30:9-14:

The LORD your God will make you successful in everything you do. He will give you many children and numerous livestock, and your fields will produce abundant harvests, for the LORD will delight in being good to you as he was to your ancestors. The LORD your God will delight in you if you obey his voice and keep the commands and laws written in this Book of the Law, and if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul. "This command

I am giving you today is not too difficult for you to understand or perform. It is not up in heaven, so distant that you must ask, 'Who will go to heaven and bring it down so we can hear and obey it?' It is not beyond the sea, so far away that you must ask, 'Who will cross the sea to bring it to us so we can hear and obey it?' The message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart so that you can obey it.

God wants the people to know that they can do what he is asking them to do. It isn't so hard they cannot accomplish it—nor so remote they cannot reach it. God wanted his word not only at their finger-tips, but also on the tips of their tongues.

Ancient Israel was a "by heart" community. Most of their customs, practices and lessons were all learned by young children at the feet of their parents and teachers. God's words were to become part of these "by heart" lessons, not because they couldn't read, but because the heart is where God's word must live.

We can memorize scripture as children, but learning to take and keep God's word in our hearts takes a lifetime. I appreciate and value all the Bible verses I learned as a child, but as an adult I must let God's word come alive through all areas of my life. We can learn the word of God by heart, and never take to heart the word of God.

My friend Scott Saunders is in the dent repair business. One day in talking to him about a dent on my truck, I asked him if it could be popped out. He said, "No" and went on to explain how the sheet metal in modern cars is so thin that it has no "memory." It used to be that the thicker metal had "memory" and could be restored to its original shape without much trouble.

Let's hope that our metal (faith) never becomes so thin that we get in danger of losing our memory. Our metal is made stronger by Bible study, worship participation, and community involvement. But we think that we're too busy these days, and much too smart to memorize scripture.

And so, when we wreck, our life has a big dent in it. I hope our faith has enough memory to be of help when our life crashes. And I hope our children will have the memory they need to survive life's clashes and collisions.

The heart is an open vessel and you must decide what to fill it with. Let's fill it with the word of God.

Kent Massey may be contacted at kmassey@prcoc.org.

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What If?

by Paul Jarrett

This July 4th our nation celebrated the 228th anniversary of the signing of the *Declaration of Independence*. The preamble of this historic document begins with these familiar words:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Have you ever thought about how the prevailing culture of our day might influence the wording of this famous declaration?

First, I think it would be safe to say there would be no reference to a Creator as the source of our rights. I would also assume that, if truth in labeling were to be practiced, there would be some changes in the list of our rights. The end result might read like this:

"Our human rights are Lifestyle, License, and the pursuit of Pleasure." Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address, said of that time in American history:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a nation conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."

I believe it can be said that 11 score and 8 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we are involved in a great cultural war between theism and humanism that is testing whether this nation will continue to be the nation our forefathers conceived and dedicated. We must awaken to the fact that lifestyles are really only false ways that lead away from the abundant life to be found only in Christ. We must make it clear that true liberty is found only in living lives of responsible service to one another. License is a broad way that leads to death.

The pursuit of pleasure is a vain pursuit, while the pursuit of happiness will lead us to the realization that the whole duty of man is to "fear God and keep His commandments."

You can contact Paul Jarrett at pejarrett@earthlink.net.

In the Crucible of Life

by Peter Rode

The verse in Malachi which reads, "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver" (3:3) puzzled some women in a Bible study and they wondered what this statement meant about the character and nature of God. One of the women offered to find out the process of refining silver and get back to the group at their next Bible Study.

That week, the woman called a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work.

She didn't mention anything about the reason for her interest beyond her curiosity about the process of refining silver. As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest as to burn away all the impurities.

The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot when she thought again about the verse that says: "He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver." She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. He answered "yes," he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled at her and answered, "Oh, that's easy—when I see my image in it."

The Apostle Peter wrote, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering…rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ…praise God that you bear that name" (1 Peter 4:12-16) and Paul wrote, "…we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son…" (Romans 8:28-29). So today if you are feeling the heat of the fire, remember that God has His eye on you and will keep watching you until He sees His image in you. Whatever you are going through will result in you becoming a better person and becoming more like Jesus!

Peter Rode serves the Friendly Ave. church of Christ. He can be contacted at 5101 W. Friendly Ave., Greensboro, NC 27410.

Love Your Vecino

by Stephen J. Walls-Mathis

Judging from the cries and complaints on both ends of the political spectrum, President Bush struck close to just right with his January proposal on undocumented workers. The President is crafting a compromise in the best sense of the word. He recognizes the reality of millions of Mexican workers–as well as those of other nationalities–filling necessary jobs most Americans are unwilling to do. His proposal would grant them a legal status, far short of amnesty, offer a minimum of legal protection which they now lack, and establish a measure of control over a volatile situation.

For awhile, the President's proposal faced critics on the left and the right. The former complained that his proposal did not go far enough. Immigration reform advocates want a fast-track approach, which would guarantee undocumented workers many of the rights and privileges of citizenship without regard to the violation of immigration law. Unfortunately, opening wide the door threatens our physical security and may overburden social and economic systems at the local level. The latter, taking a more isolationist approach, often couched their critiques in terms of the rule of law. Here the battle cry is deportation for lawbreakers, with little regard for the consequences of such a stance. However, closing the door of immigration runs counter to our national heritage and would cause irreparable harm to our place in the global economy. For now, in the midst of news from Iraq and the ever-increasing election campaign coverage, the entire proposal and its critics have fallen off the media radar screen, which is unfortunate.

There are already millions of undocumented workers in our country. We have not done a good job stopping their entry or policing their movements. They are filling jobs that American workers are not willing to do. Their presence is an economic and social reality that our nation must face with sobriety and careful consideration.

In many ways the different critiques rest on two common clichés: "These people have a great work ethic" and "These people are stealing our jobs." I heard these same comments during my two years working in the Human Resources Department of the local manufacturing branch of an international entertainment company. My main responsibilities involved staffing our unskilled "temporary" workforce. ("Temporary" meant no benefits, no contract, and no guaranteed hours.) The workforce exploded from 300 workers to close to 1000 in a year's time, with employees drawn mainly from immigrant Hispanic workers usually employed in central Virginia's orchards and farms.

At the time I was naive enough to trust our I-9 inspection system to keep us from hiring any illegal aliens. I know now that we did, in fact, employ workers who were using borrowed and/or forged documents. It was a sobering experience. (Ironically, last year the local manufacturing plant was closed with most of the operation relocated to Guadalajara, Mexico.)

The criticisms and clichés fall short of the truth. The workers who have entered our country illegally have done so for a vast variety of reasons. Undoubtedly, many came here to escape desperate situations, to find a better life, to earn a living unavailable in their native land. Like people all over the world, some of these workers have a strong work ethic while others do not. Certainly there are those who have no regard for the laws of our nation. (The same can be said of many who are natural born American citizens.)

Regardless of their reasons for coming here we share in the responsibility for the current situation. These workers are here, ultimately, for one reason: American companies are willing to violate the law and hire them. They are here because for too long American citizens have turned a blind eye to the situation, willing to ignore criminal behavior in exchange for undesirable work being completed by others. Additionally, we share a measure of responsibility simply due to geography and economic proximity. As Robert Frost knew it takes more than good fences to be good neighbors. It is time for us to become good neighbors. Our economic wellbeing and our national security depend on this.

Ultimately, no government action will provide what these undocumented workers need. They need, first and foremost, Christ Jesus and his church. Living in line with the gospel may mean that we have to rethink our assumptions about strangers and aliens, both legal and illegal. We need to seriously consider what it means to be the church of Christ in an economy that benefits from the labor of those who lack access to basic protections. How can we stand as advocates for those who have no legal standing? Are there ways for us to avoid taking economic advantage of undocumented workers? Where can we show mercy and compassion to people living on the fringe of our society? Hopefully these “strangers and aliens” will receive the heightened visibility necessary for us to see our responsibility as Christ’s ambassadors in our own communities.

Dr. Dale Pauls, minister of the Stamford, CT, Church of Christ writes of embracing an openhanded approach to life “that produces a Great Society whose people give, who take responsibility for their society, who follow in the footsteps of our Founding Fathers–Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison–and give their lives, their time, their energy, their dreamspace, their finest years, their money to the betterment of humanity, to saving the world… When we give to the hungry and thirsty, when we invite the stranger in, when we house the homeless, we greatly benefit ourselves. We cut down on crime and disease. We reduce violence. We increase our own security…We save our own lives. It’s this opening wide our hands, not coerced but freely down as a simple matter of character, that creates a Great Society, a creditor nation, not a debtor nation.” (This Week¸ January 18, 2004, Stamford, CT)

One night Jesus was invited to a dinner party at the home of a local religious leader. During the dinner a woman “of ill repute,” looked down on if noticed at all, approached Jesus and did what no one else was willing to do. She washed Jesus’ feet, a simple, menial task. The Messiah honored her for it. Then he asked his host, “Simon, do you see this woman?” (Luke 7:36-50). Perhaps he is asking today if we see these eight million souls.

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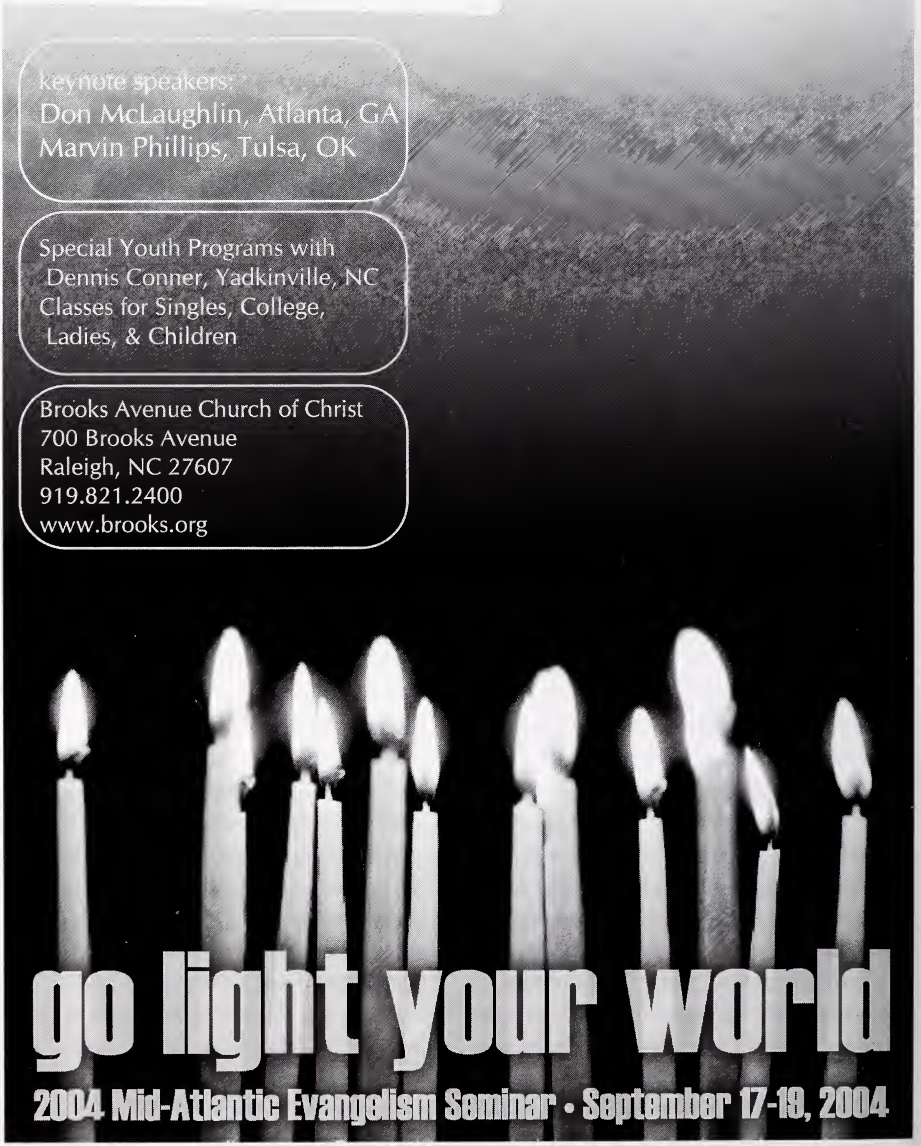
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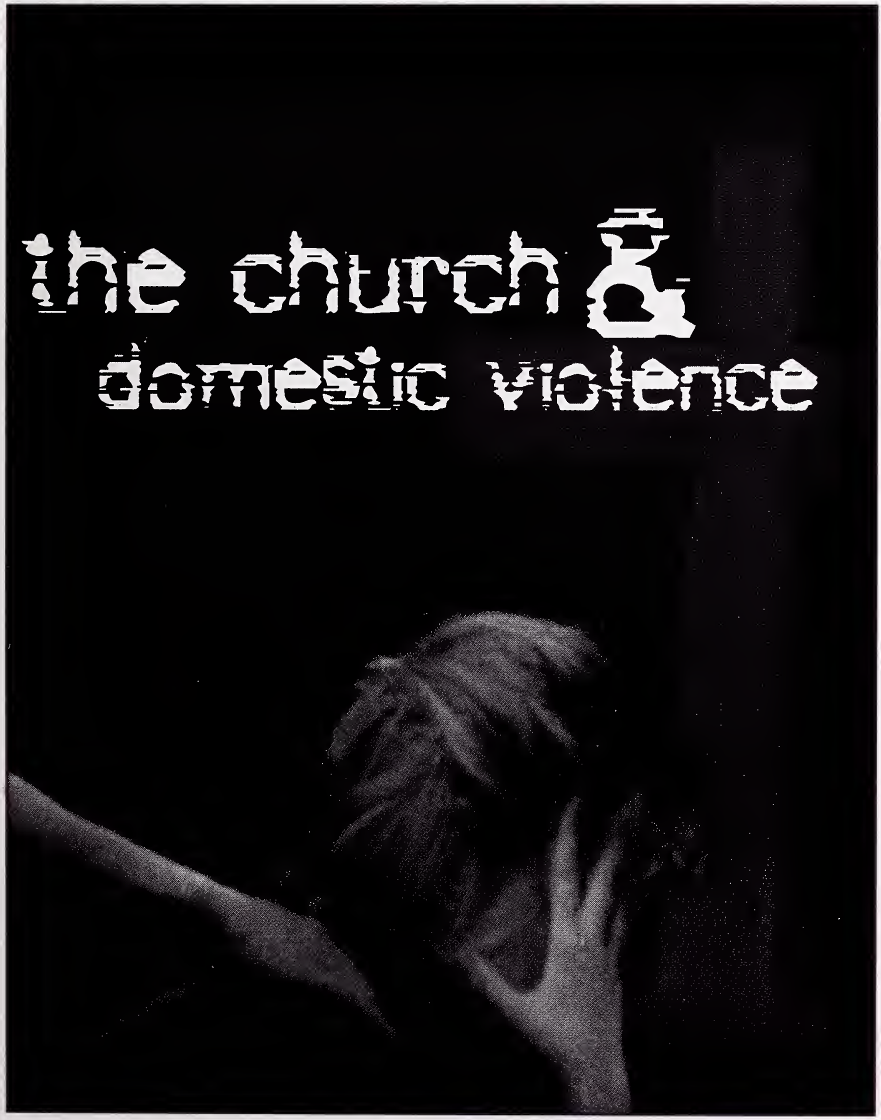

the church & domestic violence

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Editorial & Publication Staff
Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
Ron Newberry, Associate Editor
Mark Hudson, News Editor
Catherine Thacker, Design Editor

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Mark Hudson
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Jesus & Carnegie

by Dennis Conner

The more I understand about Jesus, the more I see that he really didn't know much about growing churches. He apparently had little grasp of marketing principles and philosophy and had this way of making membership in his group sound quite unappealing and even demanding. To prove my point, let me cite two examples.

First, there's the account in Mark 10:17-22 of the wealthy young man who came to Jesus and knelt before him (good start!) with the important question, "Teacher, what do I need to do to have eternal life?" That's the right question! "Keep the law," Jesus said. "Done that since I was a kid," young man says.

Jesus has a perfect opportunity in front of him. This guy is rich and he has moral respectability going for him. Not only that, Jesus didn't even have to go looking for him; the guy came looking for Jesus. Is this too good or what? Churches would kill (well, not literally) to have a guy like this as a member. He's the ideal candidate for church membership. Might even make a good elder some day! What happens next, though, is simply bad marketing.

"There is something you still need to take care of," Jesus said. "I want you to sell everything—the Mercedes, your 4,000 square foot house, your boat, stocks, even your golf clubs—and give it all to the poor. Then you can come follow me." At those words the young man did what anybody in their right mind would have done; he walked away.

You see, Jesus made the mistake here of asking too much. If you want to grow a church, you've got to make it appealing to people. You focus on what you can offer them, not on taking what they have. People have got to feel comfortable, but Jesus clearly stepped over the comfort threshold by telling this guy to sell everything and give it to the poor. The young man's face fell to his ankles. I know Jesus was an idealist, but you've got to be reasonable about what you ask of church members. If you ask too much, expect too much, you'll run people off. They will visit once and never come back! In fact, that's exactly what happened in this case.

The young man went away, grieved, because the demands were simply too unreasonable. Can you blame him? If Jesus had only asked for, say, 30%, everyone would have come off looking good. The young man would have felt good about his generosity and Jesus would have had a new follower, and the church budget would have gotten a boost. Forget that. Jesus was asking too much. Not even the IRS asks for everything. Now, had he just lowered his standards a bit the guy likely would have stuck around.

What happens next is truly astounding. The young man walks away and Jesus does…nothing! Can you believe it? Jesus just let him go! How many shots do you get at potential church member like that? How can you grow a church like that?

The next example is found in Luke 9:57-62 when three prospective church members approach Jesus. The first guy says, "I'll follow you anywhere!" Now, that's what you're looking for, church members who will do anything without even being asked! This guy is obviously a go-getter. He'll volunteer for any kind of ministry and do anything that needs to be done. Then, Jesus does it again. Listen to what he said:

"The foxes have holes, and the bird of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." What's up with that? What kind of welcome speech was that? Man, talk about a turn off. Here comes a guy just eager to join up, obviously full of enthusiasm, and Jesus promptly rains on his parade!

The second guy is spoken to by Jesus first, "Follow me." Maybe this guy wasn't quite as outgoing as the first one, but he was respectful of his family. He just wanted to bury his father first. He wasn't exactly asking for the world, if you know what I mean. Just wanted to bury his dad. "Let the dead take care of the dead," says Jesus. That's about as sensitive as a rock! He obviously never heard of Dale Carnegie. A couple of classes about how to win friends and influence people wouldn't have hurt.

The third guy also comes to Jesus. "I'm yours, Lord. Just let me get things in order and say goodbye to my family first." Obviously a good family man; the kind of man you want in your congregation. But again, true to form, Jesus throws up another hoop to jump through, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

See what I mean? Jesus was just too blunt, too demanding, and didn't understand that if you want people to sign on to a church you focus on what the church can do for them, not what they can do for the church. And you can't be so demanding! After all, people have their own lives to live. You've got to be sensitive to that kind of stuff or people aren't going to stick around very long.

The thing about Jesus from these stories is that he consistently expected people to come into his kingdom on his terms, not their own. He expected them to have their priorities clearly in focus and would brook nothing less than undivided loyalty. Would be followers would have to be willing to deal with anything (whether it be wealth or ego) that vied for space with Jesus in their hearts. And if anyone couldn't deal with that, the loss was theirs.

Nope. Jesus didn't know much about growing a church, but he knew everything about building a kingdom.

the Butterfly Effect

by Ron Newberry

A young man struggling with the psychological effects of suppressed childhood memories devises a technique of traveling back in time to inhabit his childhood body. However, he finds that every trip back has unintended consequences on himself and others. These unintended results lead him to travel back in time again and again, trying to repair the damage for which he is responsible. Unfortunately he continues to only make them worse and worse.

That is the premise of the movie The Butterfly Effect. The butterfly effect is at the heart of what is known as "Chaos Theory." The butterfly effect, simply put, states that a butterfly flapping its wings in Africa could cause a hurricane that slams into the Atlantic coast of North America. The simple imperceptible movement of a butterfly could catch the eye of a hungry bird which in its haste to capture a meal startles a lone wilder beast that jumps to his feet causing a stampede that churns up dust that rises into the atmosphere altering the rainfall pattern which…well, you get the idea.

Seemingly insignificant actions which set in motion a series of events that end in catastrophic weather patterns is, of course, mere theory. This mathematical theory does make for a great premise for a science fiction movie and for stimulating discussion, but in the end the butterfly effect has not been proven and remains fanciful speculation.

On the other hand, there is another effect that is not theory, conjecture or speculation. It is the law of sowing and reaping. Galatians 6:7-8 (NIV) states it this way: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

There are basically three parts to this law, which everyone needs to keep in mind, especially our youth.

Law of Sowing and Reaping Part 1:
You always reap ***what*** *you sow.*
While extremely simple, the importance of this fact cannot be underestimated. The profound implications of this truth are contained in its simplicity. One cannot plant watermelon seeds and expect to harvest peanuts. Peach seeds produce peach trees. Sowing the sinful nature produces a harvest of destruction. Sowing to please God produces a harvest of eternal life.

Law of Sowing and Reaping Part 2:
You always reap ***later*** *than you sow.*
The significance of this aspect of the law of sowing and reaping is fact that those who sow to the sinful nature frequently believe that they have "gotten away with" something. They harbor sinful attitudes or commit sinful acts and because there are no immediate

consequences, they believe their sins have gone undetected. Likewise we may foster self-sacrificing attitudes and give sacrificially of ourselves only to feel ignored and unnoticed. However, the truth is whether we sow good or evil we will reap a harvest at a later time.

Law of Sowing and Reaping Part 3: *You always reap **more** than you sow.* The proportion of seed sown to grain harvested is always tremendous. A few hundred grains of corn can produce hundreds of stalks with multiple ears of corn per stalk with hundreds of grains per ear. The crop harvested when one sows sin is destruction because one reaps more than he sows. The harvest of one who sows that which pleases God reaps eternal life because one reaps more than he sows.

The theory of the butterfly effect may or may not have some validity. Fortunately when it comes to something as serious as our souls we don't have to guess or rely on theories. The law of sowing and reaping always functions consistently. We reap *what* we sow, *later* than we sow and *more* than we sow. Let us not be deceived: God cannot be mocked.

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introducing our theme

October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month. While the eyes of our society are being increasingly opened to this blight, the eyes of the church have remained generally closed. It is a difficult thing to acknowledge that in our congregations people are not only acting less than Christian, but are being violent. Many women suffer in silence because of fear, or because they have on some occasion cried out, only to have their cries fall upon deaf ears. Make no mistake about it: domestic violence exists in the church. The information and theme articles in this edition of *Carolina Christian* only touch the tip of the iceberg regarding issues related to the church's response to domestic violence, but hopefully, what we have provided will spark a desire to know and understand more about this important issue. You will notice that all the articles deal with the subject from the perspective of men as abusers and women as victims. *We are fully aware that men are also victims and women can be batterers* (there is no doubt that domestic violence incidents with men as victims and women as abusers is under reported). We deplore the violence regardless of who is responsible for committing it. However, the vast majority of domestic violence incidents involve women as the victims, and it is from that perspective that we approach the problem.

If we have helped to increase any awareness at all, then God has blessed our efforts with this issue.

domestic violence statistics

Nearly one-third of American women (31 percent) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives. *–Commonwealth Fund survey, 1998*

Estimates range from 960,000 incidents of violence against a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend each year to 4 million women who are physically abused by their husbands or live-in partners each year. – *Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends, U.S. Department of Justice, March, 1998*

Studies show that child abuse occurs in 30-60% of family violence cases that involve families with children. – "The overlap between child maltreatment and woman battering." *J.L. Edleson, Violence Against Women, February, 1999*

A child's exposure to the father abusing the mother is the strongest risk factor for transmitting violent behavior from one generation to the next. – *Report of the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family, APA, 1996*

One in five female high school students reports being physically or sexually abused by a dating partner. *– Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), August 2001*

Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women.

85-95% of all domestic violence victims are female.

75% of domestic violence deaths among women occur when she is trying to leave, or after she has left.

The Church &
Don

The preacher of Ecclesiastes wrote, "Again, I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun; I saw tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter, power was on the side of the oppressors and they have no comforter," (Ecclesiastes 4:1). Every fifteen seconds a woman in this country is beaten by her husband or boyfriend. The greatest health risk to women in the United States is domestic violence, causing more injuries to women than rapes, muggings and car accidents combined. Women are in nine times more danger in their homes than on the street. It is estimated that 30%-50% of women murdered in this country are killed by current or former intimate partners. In recent years the dirty secret of violence in the home and interpersonal relationships has finally begun to receive the attention it has too long deserved. Most counties across America now have government supported agencies for helping the victims of domestic violence and laws and been enacted and strengthened to be more supportive of the victims. Much remains to be done, but our nation is on the right track. However, there is still an important question that begs to be asked, "But what about the church?"

Domestic violence it is not only a problem in society at large; it is also a problem in the church. Christians would like to think that domestic violence occurs in the lives of worldly people and seldom, if ever, in the lives of those who profess to be Christians. The church is called to live and minister in the real world, but too often the real world is found in the church. Studies already tell us that the rate of divorce among Christians is almost identical to that of people in secular society. Are we so naïve as to think that it would be any different with domestic violence?

For instance, a recent story in the *Christian Chronicle* reported the shooting deaths of a 42 year old woman and her 18 year old daughter, and the critical injury of the 15 year old son near Columbia, Tennessee. The three attended the Ephesus Church of Christ in Columbia. The attacker was the ex-husband of the woman (and the father of her children) and had a history of domestic violence. Even in the small congregation for which I preach there have been three cases of domestic violence in the lifespan of the church.

Too often, when domestic violence does rear its ugly head, the response of the church has been silence: either the silence of ignorance (just not knowing or being aware), or the silence of fear. In his book *Battered Into Submission*, Dr. James Aldurf writes, "As long as the church is quiet in a world which resonates with the cries of abused women, it is failing in its ministry…It is simply functioning as a sounding brass and a clanging cymbal…The church is called to bind up the bruises

estic Violence

by Dennis Conner

of women who have suffered not only from the violence of their spouses, but also from the passive violence of a church which has failed to recognize their situation and intervene on their behalf." Paul said that in the body of Christ we are to "have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it." To the church in Rome he exhorted, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." Too often, when domestic violence is the cause of suffering and weeping, victims have suffered and wept alone. As the body of Christ it is our responsibility to be sensitive to the suffering of women in our congregations and to equip our leaders to offer a biblical and compassionate response.

Yet, the church has been slow to renounce and respond to the violence carried on behind closed doors in many of our families. We have sometimes been guilty of a "passive violence" against abused women. Domestic violence is a crime, but it is more than a crime: it is a sin! It is a sin against another human being created in the image of God, and silence is complicity in that sin.

There is so much at stake when the church fails to respond to the sin of domestic violence in its midst. *The honor of Christ is at stake.* Abusive marriage does not reflect the holy model of Christ's love for his bride. *The honor of God's sense of justice for the disadvantaged is at stake.* God has no patience for those who use their power to oppress others. When domestic violence is ignored we demonstrate a lack of compassion for the victim and a lack of appreciation for God's care for the oppressed. *And the health of the church is at stake.* When the church fails—or refuses—to be an agent of healing, there is something systemically wrong.

What can the church do to assist our sisters caught in the cycle of domestic violence?

The first step is *awareness*. Admit that the problem exists. Refusal to acknowledge that the problem exists, or the whitewashing of situations that do exist, simply adds to an internal festering wound.

The second step is *education*. Leaders should become familiar with the telltale signs of abuse. Make use of the internet. Call your local domestic violence shelter or program to get informational resources. Occasionally preach and teach on the subject of violence in marital relationships, thus alerting and educating the congregation.

When a woman comes to you as the preacher or a leader, *believe her.* One of the greatest fears a battered woman has is that of not being believed. Rarely do women lie or exaggerate about domestic violence. Much more likely is that she will be telling you the minimal truth; she may very well underplay the seriousness and intensity of the violence. She is likely taking a great risk by coming to you, so why would she lie? *Listen to her and affirm her feelings.*

Next, *condemn the violence.* Let her know that the church does not under any circumstances condone violence in relationships and that you support her. As for the abuser, he should be held accountable. In dealing with the abuser the church leaders should be resolute in their condemnation of violence, and the abuser should be made aware that the behavior is sin. One very important word of caution, however: *be very careful about the circumstances under which the abuser is confronted.* If he is confronted while the wife is still in the home, you could be putting her safety or her life in jeopardy. It may be preferable to wait until she is in a safe place.

Encourage her to find a safe place if she is in physical danger. It could be the home of a friend or relative, a shelter, motel or a safe place the church has provided for. It is best if the abuser does not know where the victim has fled. However, do not make the decision for her. Be aware of the temptation to want to be the rescuer. You then become simply another controller in her life. The decision must be hers and it must be made only when she is ready. Otherwise, you may be endangering her as she tries to leave or you may be increasing the likelihood that she will go back if it is not her decision. If she decides to stay, let her know of your concern, but support her anyway.

Be prepared to refer her to appropriate agencies for help. Have readily available a list of local family service agencies, domestic violence agencies, shelters, etc.

Be prepared to support the victim over the long haul. Studies reveal that a victim of domestic violence leaves an average of 7-9 times before making a final break from the violence. The temptation of church leaders, friends and family is to want to give up after she leaves the third or fourth time and then goes back yet again. Let her know that you will always be there for her. The time will likely come when she is ready to be done with the violence for good and the church will need to be there for her when that time arrives. As frustrating as it may be, don't give up!

Ignorance and denial are unacceptable responses to Christian women caught up in the cycle of domestic violence and violent relationships. The church must dare to be what God has called it to be, a family of Christ-like compassion and an agent of healing and comfort. We must do what we can to take the power from the oppressor and provide comfort to the oppressed. Relationship violence is always wrong!

The Dance of Domestic Violence

by Gayle Bryan

"The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates," (Psalm 11:5).

God hates violence! Domestic violence is a sin! Domestic violence is a crime! Domestic violence is assault and battery and includes spousal rape, mental abuse, child abuse (physical, mental and sexual), as well as elder abuse. Domestic violence is a misuse of power and is marked by extreme intensity with great emotional and physical force. It is rage! It is wrath and it's intent is to damage and control. Domestic violence, under any name, not only damages a person's body and mind, but worse yet, damages the victim at the inmost level of the soul.

The dance begins when batterers and victims are drawn to each other in courtship and marriage. Each is wounded by violence from his/her family of origin; each has low self-esteem and is programmed to take up his/her learned role in the dance. She believes herself to have no value going into the relationship. He is charming in the beginning, protective, and possessive. She often has unrealistic beliefs that he is her "Prince Charming." However, his charm disappears when the marriage door shuts. His possessiveness turns into extreme jealousy, which in time leads to her isolation. His protection turns into overbearing control. He wants to micro-manage her minute by minute, yelling for hours if she is as much as one minute late. The longer it goes on the more it is built in.

The dance continues. The wife believes she can fix him and erase all the hurt he had as a kid. She believes she can please him and then he will change. Early on, the wife is not allowed to have friends or see family. Often he prevents her from going out altogether and will even use sabotage to keep her at home. She is unassertive and insecure. He does nothing for himself. He is impulsive, has low ego strength and is usually addictive. He may be a sociopath with no sense of being connected to anyone and having no moral judgment. Jealousy abounds. Tensions rise. He is threatened from work and doesn't manage conflict well at all. He's been put down and devalued, and so, he then transfers this to his wife-victim. Both are easily threatened. Communication frustrates and fails. Talking transitions to quarreling, to shouting, to pushing, shoving, hitting, and ultimately to pummeling and battering. He blames his wife for everything that goes wrong. He blames her for making him beat her, and somehow, she finds a point in what he is doing, and she believes she is the cause; and therefore, the abuse is justified in both their eyes. When he has exhausted himself and she shuts down emotionally, or goes to the hospital, or leaves, then remorse sets in. He wants her back; he must have her back; but she doesn't know what she wants. He vows his deep sorrow, may even cry, and beg her to come back to him. He promises he will never do it again, and he becomes very tender and loving toward her. She goes back to him. Then they go through the honeymoon phase of the dance. He is finally giving her the love and affection that she craves. She now has the man she has always wanted, but it is short-lived. He feels in control of himself and her. The dance of violence begins again, always escalating in frequency, degree and intensity. She is addicted to him. In the dance, if the time period between battering goes too long, she may begin to provoke him. The cycle of violence is danced again, and again, and again!

Experts say that women are beaten about five times before they ever dial 911. Staggering statistics from the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, in their Consumer Update on Domestic Violence, states that 4 million women experience Domestic Violence every year. Domestic violence occurs on some level in 50% of all marriages. A 1992 report revealed that domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women ages 15-44. Battered women are in the most danger when they flee the relationship. Marital violence is especially common among young couples.

Religious batterers and victims are traditionally religiously dogmatic with patriarchal values where all power is absolute over women, who should only want to serve the man. Women feel pressure to not bring shame to themselves, to their family, to their church, or to their good standing in the community by revealing the abuse in their marriage. Women may feel that it is their responsibility to maintain peace in the home. Further, abused women are in a spiritual crisis and often feel abandoned by God, family, and church. Rather than receiving from the church the support, resources and alternatives they need, Christian women may feel compelled to stay in abusive relationships. Christian leaders and members, who do not understand domestic violence often advise them to return to their violent homes and be "better wives," "serve your husband," "submit to your husband," "forgive your husband," "you must endure suffering!" and "You made your bed, you lie in it!"

The church must get its head out of the sand. Accept that domestic violence does exist and that God hates it. Safety comes first. Batterers and victims cannot remain in the same arena. Call 911. Demand accountability for the abuser with the courts, in counseling and in the church (if he is a member). Support the victim. Restore individuals, and if possible relationships, or, mourn the loss of the relationship.

In religious training, leaders often learn general marriage counseling techniques. These skills can be woefully lacking and can even be perilous in dealing with domestic violence. However, the church can create an environment of awareness and support. Support special education for leaders, and promote seminars for all. Identify members of the congregation and community that victims can reach out to. Speak out against domestic violence in sermons and classes. Deeper studies of scripture on more balanced and godly marriage relationships are critical. Maintain a file for referrals to shelters, hotline, legal advocacy, and support groups. Display brochures and victim hotline numbers. Discuss with advocates ways in which a survivor can safely participate in your church family. Help end the dance of domestic violence.

responding to domestic violence: guidelines for church leaders

do's and don'ts with an abusive partner

If he has been arrested, **do** approach him and express your concern and support for him to be accountable and to deal with his violence.

don't meet with him alone and in private. Meet in a public place or in the church building with several other people around.

don't approach him or let him know that you know about his violence unless: (a) you have the victim's permission, (b) she is aware that you plan to talk to him, and (c) you are certain that his partner is safely separated from him.

do address any religious rationalizations he may offer or questions he may have.

don't allow him to use religious excuses for his behavior.

do name the violence as his problem, not hers. Tell him that only he can stop it, and you are willing to help.

do warn the victim if he makes specific threats against her.

don't pursue couple's counseling with him and his partner if you are aware that there is violence in the relationship. Counseling should be done individually.

don't go to him to confirm the victim's story.

don't give any information about his partner or her whereabouts.

don't be taken in by his minimization, denial or lying about his violence, or his attempts to blame her for his behavior.

do be aware that any "conversion" experience may very well be used as a way of manipulating you and his partner so as to maintain control of the situation and avoid accountability.

don't confuse his remorse for true repentance.

do pray with him, asking God to help him stop his violence, repent, and find a new way of life. **do** assure him of your support in this endeavor.

do find ways to collaborate with community agencies and law enforcement to hold him accountable.

(From The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, Seattle, WA, 1998)

Why does

As I sat in the Jiffy Lube waiting for my car to finish getting an oil change, the gentleman next to me started chatting. Where are you from? What's your name? What do you do? That last question is loaded because I work with victims of domestic violence, and invariably when people learn that their next question is almost always *"Why does she stay?"* Today was no different.

I usually respond to that question by asking "What about the question, why does an abuser abuse?" Isn't that what really matters anyway. Would a person need to leave if there wasn't someone hurting her? Who is really in the wrong here? Very often the person asking that question is implying blame of the victim for staying. After all, if the victim just left, we wouldn't have a problem with domestic violence, right? Wrong! Domestic violence is always the fault of the abuser. I want to make sure we are very clear about that. But as I listened to this man on this day, I heard a very different need behind the question.

As I listened, I heard a father who hurt every time his little girl was beaten by her husband. A father who's heart cried out wanting his little girl to run to safety, but knowing that the little girl was a woman who had to make her own decisions. And these decisions were not always the ones that he, as a father, thought were the best ones for her. And his heart cried.

Sometimes our hearts cry out when we see someone we love in danger, in fear, being hurt and we get frustrated when we don't understand the decisions they are making. There are many answers to the question we are discussing and the answers are not simple. Very often, there are multiple reasons that a persons stays in a violent relationship and usually these reasons interact in a very complex way.

Probably the number one reason that women stay in violent relationships is fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of being killed, fear the abuser might hurt or kill people they love (a very common threat by abusers). And this fear is justified. Three-quarters of women murdered by their significant others (husband, boyfriends, ex's) have left the relationship. When we tell her to "just leave", we may be asking her to walk the plank to her death. Many times staying is safer than leaving. Why? Because the minute she leaves, he loses control of her, and as you have probably already read, domestic violence is about power and control. So when he loses control of her, he must try to regain it. Killing her is the ultimate statement of control. "If I can't have you, no one will."

Another reason she stays is financial. If she walks out, she may lose everything. It's easy to judge her and say "Just get a job," but if you have stayed home for the last 10 years with 3 kids, here are your choices: 1) Leave and take the kids (how do you plan to support them with no work experience?)

she stay?

by Erin Weeks

or 2) Leave and leave the kids (now he may hurt them, since you aren't there to protect them). In several situations I have known, the house was hers before they got married. He moved in and started abusing her and now things are dangerous. Shouldn't he be the one to move out? This is her house after all. If she leaves, the house may be foreclosed on and this will ruin her credit, making it very hard to start over.

One of the most compelling reasons women stay is for the children. They often believe that any father is better than no father. Maybe the father has not beaten the children so there is the illusion that they aren't being hurt by the abuse. I disagree. To abuse the mother is to abuse the children—at least emotionally. I have talked to many children who share stories of listening to their parents' fights at night, fights that their parents think are happening after the kids are in bed and unaware. Kids know! If a woman stays, thinking she are protecting she kids, she ends up only teaching them that this behavior is acceptable. This is a dangerous lesson to be teaching children. What choice do you have when the abuser threatens to kill the children if you leave, or to treat them the same way he has been treating you?

Religion often plays a significant role. We vow to make marriage work "for better or for worse." The abused persons often feel that if they don't stay and make it work, they have failed, or have sinned. Often, their religious communities encourage this viewpoint. Victims are encouraged to pray harder, seek God's will, or be more submissive. Victims are sometimes asked to leave churches for their "sin" of divorce when they finally do leave in order to save the lives of themselves and their children; or they are made to feel so uncomfortable that they leave on their own. Sometimes, these same religious leaders show up as a character witness for the abuser at criminal proceedings when the abuser has beaten the victim and the law enforcement officers pressed charges. I have seen courtrooms packed with members from a church there to support the abuser in these cases. When a woman takes her faith seriously and trusts the leaders of her church, it makes if very hard for a victim to leave. To leave in such a case can represent a rebellion against the victim's faith as well. That is why it is important to understand that a victim is not "sinning" by acting to insure her safety. She needs the support of her church family.

Usually the abuser will tell the victim that the beating was her fault. "If you had not cut your hair…if you had spent time with me and not watching that ball game…if dinner had been on time….if you hadn't spent that money on yourself…if you had not taken so long at the grocery store….if you had not talked you your sister for so long on the phone….I would not have had to hit you. It is your bad behavior that makes me so mad…makes me have to enforce the rules…teach a lesson, etc." And the list goes on.

Many times, the victim will actually accept responsibility for making the abuser mad and then she believes that it *is* her fault she has been beaten, again. So, if it is the victim's fault, then can't the victim change it by being better? This is what the abuser wants the victim to believe because it keeps her trying to please the abuser even more. The truth is, in the abuser's eyes, the victim will never be good enough. The abuser will always find a reason to hurt her.

Another roadblock in the path to leaving an abusive relationship is how family and friends will view such a move. A victim may ask herself how she could tell anyone about it. To do so would be to admit her failings. If her family has warned her about this partner, they may take the stance of "Well, you made your bed, now you are going to have to lie in it." This can further the victim's sense of isolation and hopelessness. She may have no social support telling her this isn't right, or those around the victim may see this behavior as normal and not help her get out. Some would see it as the victim's fault if she were to break up the family, while in fact it is the behavior of the batterer that really destroys the family. One of the most difficult reasons a victim may have for not leaving a relationship is that despite all of the pain the abuser causes, the victim often honestly loves the abuser. In the average violent relationship the victim is beaten 3-4 times a year, not every day or every week. This leaves the victim with a false sense of security in believing that the abuser is not always like this. In between incidents of abuse the victim sees the person that she fell in love with and wanted to spend the rest of her life with. Many times the abuser may apologize after an incident and make up to her with promises of change and gifts. Because of this, the victim keeps hoping the abuser will change, because she wants to believe the promises. There is often enough time between incidents that the victim's hope has time to grow. After all, it has been X months since the last big fight; maybe this time will be different.

Sometimes victims may look at other relationships around them and think, "It

> "Would a person need to leave if there wasn't someone hurting her?"

could be worse…", "He's not as bad as my dad with my mom…last husband… as on the news…etc." For some it might seem that someone is better than no one and the thought of being abused is better than the thought of being alone, especially if her self-esteem has gotten worn down to the point where she believes that no one else would love her, or that she couldn't make it on her own. These statements are things the abuser will often tell the victim in order to keep her feeling hopeless.

When a person gets to the point of wanting to tell the secret of her life of abuse, she often fears that she won't be believed, that she will be branded a liar, unstable, etc. After all, her spouse may be a banker, a lawyer, a doctor, even a minister. The abuser may have a good reputation in the community and the woman fears that she will be the one who is shunned. With the fear of being shunned comes a fear of losing friends, social status, home, contacts, support, etc.

As you can see, the issues are complex and when that person I am chatting with stops and says "So why doesn't she just leave," I have no short answer. So, to the man in the Jiffy Lube, your daughter may be affected by all of these things we've discussed, or none of them. Rarely is there only one reason that a person stays. It is most important that when you care about a person who is in a dangerous relationship that you understand the complexity of the decisions that have to be made. It is crucial that you support the decisions that she makes for herself, even if they differ from what you think she should do. Give her your love and support. Let her know you believe her story and in her ability to make the best decision. One thing is true, she won't leave when you want her to, but she will leave when she is ready to. If you try to make the victim leave before she's ready, you have just become the controller (i.e., stepped into the role the abuser has been playing) and you may get the victim killed. Encourage victims to speak to a professional who can help them think through their life and plans in order to plan for safety. After all, isn't that all that we want anyway?

Erin Weeks is an Associate Project Manager at the Wake Forest University School of Medicine, where she is currently working on a project researching health screening for domestic violence. She previously worked with Family Services in Winston-Salem, NC, specializing in domestic violence issues. She can be contacted at eweeks@wufbmu.edu.

The Sound of Music

by Jim Bales

Young people have come a long way from “doe, a deer, a female deer.” I just returned from a mission trip with several of our middle school kids and have some insights that I feel compelled to share. I’m stepping up onto my soapbox to preach for a minute. Please indulge me!

I can be a fun chaperone. I play the music in the van LOUD. I like to rock! But something struck me on this trip. Here’s what happened. A song came on and they all screamed, “Crank it up!” I listened to the whole thing. It was a man singing about how his ‘girl on the side’ had ‘one on the way,’ and he was confessing to his real girlfriend hoping she would give him another chance. You’ll be glad to know that I changed the station. But here’s the catch; these 12 and 13 year olds already knew the words and loved singing it! The van was rockin’. Remember-these aren’t the riff-raff of society. These are good kids on a mission trip to make a difference for Christ. I feel certain that many of them aren’t even exactly sure what they were singing about.

I tell that story to tell you this. I know that music is a big part of life for kids of all ages, but I’m continually overwhelmed and disturbed at the power and influence the current music culture has over them. It’s indirect, it’s cunning, and it’s Satan! We can’t shelter our kids and teens from everything, but I pray that all of us—especially parents—are in the trenches with our kids. When’s the last time you sat and listened to one of your kids’ CD’s or radio station? I think many of the songs would make you blush. And many of them *don’t* have parental warning stickers on them. Sex and rage are the main themes of the majority of music marketed to *your* kids. I just thought you needed to know!

I’m climbing down from my soapbox now! Please consider talking to your kids *today* about their music and relate it to Philippians 4:8, “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things.”

This article originally appeared in the online newsletter ***All About Families****, Volume 9, Number 8, and is used with permission. Jim Bales is children’s minister at the Providence Rd. church of Christ in Charlotte, NC.*

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The Sound of Music: A Parent's Perspective

by Kyle Swicegood

Music, I am finding, is a driving force in the minds of our youth. If you look at pop music's top 20, as well as various categories of rock music, you will find artists who are fighting for the minds of your children. Sadly, I'm afraid you may be shocked at what you would hear if you listen to the words of this music. Sex, death, self-centeredness and pleasure for the sake of pleasure are common themes. My concern as a parent is that as our children are exposed to these themes over time, a de-sensitizing takes place.

My wife and I pondered this question after we listened to our daughter's Brittney Spears CD. One day I was listening to the words to her music and said to myself "this girl (Brittney Spears) is encouraging my daughter to 'lose her innocence.'" With the world against us, I wondered what to do. My answer was "replace this pop-culture music with Christian pop music." Growing up with my acapella roots, I was skeptical of pop culture Christian music. A close friend introduced me to one of the leading contemporary Christian music artist. So, I replaced the Brittney CD and started playing the Christian CD in the car and around the house. After a few weeks, I noticed that my kids were mouthing the words to these songs, humming them and occasionally singing them around the house. Like most kids, they liked the "upbeat" style of music (as do I), so later I introduced them to other Christian artists and took them to a concert. They were really excited about this and I was excited about their enthusiasm. Changing my children's music habits may not be a life changing event, but one thing I will say, hearing my children sing songs like "God of wonders beyond our galaxy…You are holy" makes me feel so much better than hearing "I'm not that innocent"(from the Brittney Spears top hit). As Jesus said in Matthew 15:18-20, "But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean.'"

I encourage you to consider contemporary Christian music as an alternative for your children. While discernment is always called for, why not continue your favorite style of music with lyrics that reflect our Christian faith?

Kyle Swicegood and his wife, Elizabeth, have two children. He can be contacted at email@kyleswicegood.com.

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Walk this Way

by Kent Massey

"How do you walk?" That was the question posed to me by the shoe salesman at the athletic store. I stammered and stuttered and finally responded with a weak, "Huh?"

"You know...do you stride, swagger, swing, spring, strut, shuffle, waddle, ramble or amble?" he asked. He went on to explain the different types of walking and how by carefully examining your shoes for wear patterns, you can tell much about a person's walk. That's pretty good advice for buying shoes and living life.

The way you walk is big business today, and it's not just the shoe business that seems concerned. It seems that science has partnered with the security industry to determine if the way you walk can be used to identify you up to 500 feet away, day or night, in any weather. This new technology, called "gait-recognition" is brand new and hopes to detect, inspect, classify, and identify any individual based on the way he or she walks. Researchers hope that this tool will aid them in spotting and recognizing terrorists or those on the run from the law.

Everybody knows someone with a unique walk. It may be how he swings his arms, or how her body leans, or shuffles, or strides. You can tell who they are by their walk regardless of distance, time or proximity, all because you know their walk.

Makes you wonder if folks recognize us by our "faith gait"? Yes, they will know we are Christians by our love. But they will also know that we are Christians by the way we live, by the way we talk, by the way we walk and by the way we walk the talk.

That was Paul's reminder to a church he loved in Thessalonica. He wrote to them and said:

"This letter is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. It is written to the church in Thessalonica, you who belong to God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace, and peace. Dear brothers and sisters, we always thank God for you, as is right, for we are thankful that your faith is flourishing and you are all growing in love for each other. We proudly tell God's other churches about your endurance and faithfulness in all the persecutions and hardships you are suffering. And so we keep on praying for you, that our God will make you worthy of the life to which he called you. And we pray that God, by his power, will fulfill all your good intentions and faithful deeds. Then everyone will give honor to the name of our Lord Jesus because of you, and you will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the undeserved favor of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 1:1-4; 11-12).

Paul has some encouraging words about our "faith gait" here. He reminds us that the *faith walk is recognizable.* Even up close or at a distance, or even when our backs are turned, people see and know it over time. How we act, how we speak and what we do says volumes about who we are to those around us.

Paul observed the love, faith, patience, endurance, and resolution of these first century Christians. He saw it and talked about it. Their walk was clearly identifiable. Paul hopes the same for us.

He also says that our *faith walk is resilient*. That no matter what we do, or what is done to us, true faith—real faith—is what it is and is visible to those with eyes to see. The church in Thessalonica faced many hardships and struggles. But their faith was a beacon, and a reminder of the goodness of God to all who could see it. A measure of our faithfulness is found in our intention to be worthy of God's call, in spite of our circumstances and not because of them.

But the *faith walk is reflective.* From a variety of viewpoints, many people in our community see us living our faith corporately and individually. They see our faith in different ways. They may see our compassion and love as we feed the homeless. They may see our endurance in being God's voice as we stand for truth in a relative culture. They witness our love for one another when times of crisis and tragedy strike. They spy our love when we visit the sick or shut-in, or visit a member in the hospital, or take time to mentor and love a troubled teen.

We don't do these things to be seen by other people. Paul specifically mentions that our faith is seen in our love for one another, in our patience, endurance and steadfastness even in face of persecution and hardship. These are the qualities that will be made clear and plain, even from great distances, as we walk with God, and follow his word. If we commit to doing this, then when we say to others, "Walk this way," we will show them a truly graceful and lovely way to go. We will also show them that we aren't just talking the talk, but also walking the walk.

While in London, Vallarie and I noticed that signs were posted at street corners that said, "Look Right." We found out that those signs were posted for Americans. Over here when we step off the curb to cross an intersection, we look left to see if there is oncoming traffic. But, if you do that in London, you might get hit by a double-decker bus coming from the left.

As you "Walk This Way" always remember to "Look Right." When you do, you will exercise your faith, by walking with Jesus!

Kent Massey can be contacted at 4900 Providence Rd., Charlotte, NC 28226; or at kmassey@prcoc.org.

The Proper Proportions

by Paul Jarrett

I like to cook. While I am not a gourmet chef, I do know that there are two essentials to a good recipe: you must have the right ingredients and the right proportions of those ingredients. I have been told that I make chocolate chip cookies that would put "Famous Amos" to shame! Good cookies require both sugar and salt, but if you were to use a cup of salt and a teaspoon of sugar, the cookies would be inedible. You need not only right ingredients, but also right proportions.

I mention this because I believe that a proper understanding of Scripture also requires having the right ingredients in correct proportion. The most frequent mistake people make in their handling of the Scriptures is that of getting the proportions wrong. While the whole counsel of God is important, not every Scripture is of equal importance. The problem I am referring to was one that Jesus confronted in his conversations with the religious leaders during his ministry among people. On one occasion Jesus described their problem this way:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others," (Matthew 23:23).

Notice that Jesus did not tell them they did not have to be concerned about tithing the spices on their shelves (cookies need salt!), but he did tell them there were more important matters that needed to be present in greater proportion (like the sugar in my cookie recipe). Jesus spelled out the message for us in even clearer terms when he taught:

"Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven," (Matthew 5:19-20).

We see from the preceding text that there are commandments that may be described as "least." We also see that those who are serious about their relationship with God will strive to obey even these least commandments. However, we also see that it must be our aim to possess a righteousness that reflects what God wants most from his people, not a righteousness like that of the scribes and Pharisees who "majored in minors while minoring in major."

If we are to avoid making the same mistake in our handling of God's word, we need to give close attention to what God says is important in texts such as Isaiah 1:10-17.

Paul Jarrett can be contacted at pejarrett@earthlink.net.

The Most Lovingly Dressed of 2004 Award

by David Kneip

In the last three months I've been able to spend time in North Carolina, Texas, and Indiana. These little glimpses of different parts of the country have all had their differences, but one thing they all have in common is what I'd like to talk about this month with you. No matter what state I was in, it seemed like I was seeing more guys' underwear every day, and the girls were showing more belly button and thigh than I could believe. I don't know if you heard about it, but earlier this year an 11-year-old girl in Washington state took on the department store Nordstrom's about their lack of more "modest" clothing; now I think I understand why she complained. You may think that I've simply become an old guy—married, pushing 30, and just not in style anymore (if I ever was!)—but I think that it is worth it to think consciously about what we wear from a Christian point of view.

The more common thing to say, and what you've probably already heard, is that "certain" types of clothes aren't "appropriate" or "what a Christian girl/boy would wear." I don't think it's that easy, though. Especially for you girls, I have heard how difficult it is to find longer shirts, shorts, and skirts in the stores, and not all girls can solve the problem by fitting into boys' clothes. And I remember only too well how important what one wears is, especially in middle school and early high school. Let me give you a potentially different way of thinking about this issue that may help open up some new ideas for you. What did Jesus say were the two great commandments? That's right, love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:29-31). What would you say if I told you that wearing revealing clothing is an example of NOT loving your neighbor as yourself? If your answer is "Dude, it's just my clothes," I understand, but I would say that not thinking about what you wear is just as dangerous as not thinking about what you say. Let me explain.

Girls, you probably know that showing skin makes guys turn their heads. You may not know that when guys turn their heads to look at your tanned skin, they usually aren't thinking about how much they would like to love and care for you in a thoroughly romantic and Christian way. Not to say all guys have their minds in the gutter, but in these situations we very often are thinking about what the REST of your skin looks like without clothes on it. That may even be what you're wanting (I hope not), but that means that they are objectifying you—treating you like an object, and not a human being. To me, one of the most important things about Jesus is that he never, ever treated anyone as less than a full, made-in-God's-image human being—even huge sinners and prostitutes!

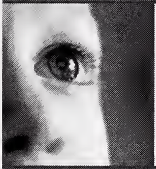
Guys, you may like how the girls look at you when you have your shirt off, with your low-riding pants showing off the new boxers you got. You may not even mind if they objectify you—you like that they focus on your muscles. But I bet most of you have known girls who have only gone out with guys for their money, their cars, or the prestige. You may like how it feels when a girl pays attention to you, but when she turns away for the next hot guy, it feels pretty rotten.

My dream for all young men (having been there myself) is that they would never treat any young woman less than they would treat Jesus' own sister, and I hope that girls treat all guys like they would Jesus' brother. I know that this is kind of idealistic, since we're all sinners, but I think that we can help each other keep our minds pure by not advertising a lot of bare skin. Unfortunately, I don't know as much about the temptations girls face in this realm, but I would encourage all the guys to ask their female friends how they can help them by what they choose to wear.

Again, you might think this isn't that big of a deal, but if so, let me encourage you to keep thinking. Read Romans 14 again, about how we can live together in faith and in love. Look at 1 John 4:19-21 once more.

Let's love each other.

Focus



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Up for Adoption

by Stephen J. Walls Mathis

Have you heard about the latest reality show? It's called "Up For Adoption." Infants from all over the world will compete for the affection of a new couple each week. There will be a series of competitions, including "Sleeping Through the Night," "Cute Giggles and Photogenic Expressions," and, my personal favorite, "Long Distance Spit Up."

Okay, I made up all of that. Hopefully none of the networks would stoop quite that low. Realistically, there is little competition when it comes to adoption. The child does not win a contest, but is chosen. Rather than competing for a parent's affection, the child is showered with acceptance and a promise of family connection.

Like many older siblings, I would often tease my younger brother, Paul, by telling him he had been left on our doorstep as a baby. A few years ago, at a family gathering, I brought that teasing up again when Paul said something particularly embarrassing in front of everyone else. In a vain attempt to distance myself from Paul, I turned to our dad and said, "Please tell me he was adopted." Dad answered, "Give me some credit. I would never pick someone like him on purpose."

Actually, Dad would choose Paul. Not because he's smart, or good looking, or fun to be with, or kind. (To be fair, I have to say he is all those things.) If given a choice, Dad would pick Paul simply because Dad loves him, and always will. The same is true of God, and his love for us.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. . . And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:1-8, 13-14 NIV)

By God's grace and love, we have become his children. He *adopted* us. Not because we lived up to some standard of goodness. Not because we are worthy or deserving of his love. He chose us for his own good pleasure, simply because he loves us. In doing so, God has placed a double bind on our lives. We were already his possession, his children because he created us. Now, we have become his children once again because he has redeemed us.

That same Christmas when I was teasing my brother, I witnessed a powerful moment. My mom gave Paul a set of apron strings as a gift, along with a letter saying she was finally cutting the apron strings and letting him grow up. Even for a family as strange as mine, it was an emotional highlight. But, it did strike me later that this is one scene that is never played out in God's family. God never cuts the apron strings. We are the children of God, and always will be. While we learn, and grow, and mature, nowhere in the Bible is a person called "an adult of God." *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are!"* (1 John 3:1 NIV)

In his short letter to his dear friend Gaius, the Apostle John gives us an incredible insight into our relationship with God. He writes, in verse 4, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." Don't you see? That's why God puts up with us! When we walk in faith, a faith that is his gift to us, we bring him great joy. We were created to bring God pleasure. And we were redeemed for that same reason. God has chosen you to be his child. That's good news.

Contact Stephen Walls-Mathis at sjwmathis@pkfamily.com.

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Hatch or Go Bad

by Kent Mereness

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or suppose a kind is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against his with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple," (Luke 14:25-33)

I was about eight years old. My big brother Kevin and his friend Quentin had just climbed the fence and I was quickly following. Only after I threw my leg over the wooden wall did I realize only one side had a cross beam, and I was now required to jump six fee to the ground. I wanted to play so bad I couldn't pull my leg back, hop down and go home. But I was also too afraid to jump. That's when my loving brother pointed, laughed, and ran off with Quentin! I straddled the fence, crying. Then I went home and told on Kevin! C. S. Lewis was once asked if the Christian walk was harder or easier. He replied in his book *Mere Christianity:* "…harder, and easier. Christ says, 'Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there; I want to have the whole tree down. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself; in own will shall become yours.'"

It is good to be reminded of foundational truths: Christ wants all of us. You cannot hold on to any of you and all of Christ at the same time. For a Christian, there is no such thing as straddling the fence.

That being said, the question in my life now becomes, "Okay. What does that look like in real life?" Lewis goes on to describe a "daily" picture of surrender:

"Life comes where people do not actually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind."

How long has it been since you've stopped and taken time to listen to the voice of God? I've heard it said that we don't read the Word; rather, the Word reads us. I believe the Bible is not about information, but about transformation. How long has it been since you've cleared your mind and listened to what God is saying to you?

Instead of listening, I tend to rationalize. I convince myself I can do what Jesus wants and what my old self wants at the same time. I convince myself that straddling the fence is easy. However, in one last passage from Lewis, he shows that in the long run, rationalizing is actually harder than surrender:

"It is hard (surrendering daily); but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder—in fact, it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad. My question, 'Are you hatched or are you going bad?'"

To experience freedom on eagles' wings you must hatch. To hatch you must listen and surrender to God's voice every day. Straddling the fence is painful daily and an impossible equation eternally.

Kent Mereness is a minister intern at the Providence Rd. church in Charlotte, NC. He can be contacted at 4900 Providence Rd., Charlotte, NC 28226.

Golden Wedding Anniversary

There will be a 50th Wedding Anniversary celebration for Henry and Janet Hewett on November 14, 2004 from 2-4 p.m. at the Pine Valley Church of Christ. The church facility is located at 3601 S. College Rd. in Wilmington, NC. For more information you can contact Diane Lynch at (918) 232-4424 or by e-mail at dhlynch1958@hotmail.com.

[trend watch]

divorces down

According to *American Demographics* (November, 2003), divorces per 1,000 have decreased in the last twenty years. In 1980, the rate was 22.6 per 1,000. In 2001 that rate had decreased to 17.8 per 1,000.

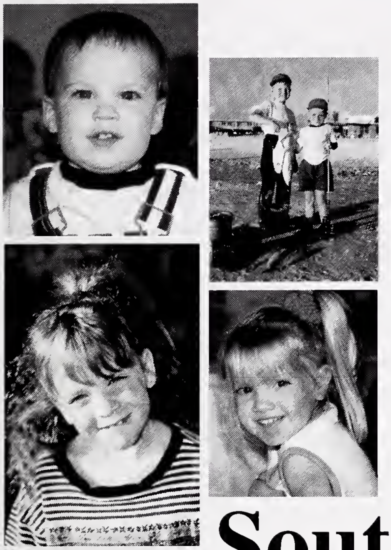
fear factor

The top 10 fears and phobias, as compiled by the National Association of They Say So (and reported in *Rev.*, Sept/Oct, 2004):

10. Fear of pain
9. Fear of failure
8. Fear of open spaces
7. Fear of flying
6. Fear of enclosed spaces
5. Fear of needles
4. Fear of spiders
3. Fear of snakes
2. Fear of heights
1. Fear of public speaking

switchers

According to a survey by *American Demographics*, more than 33 million adults (or approximately 16 percent of the total adult population) say that they had changed their religious identification or preference at some point in their lives.



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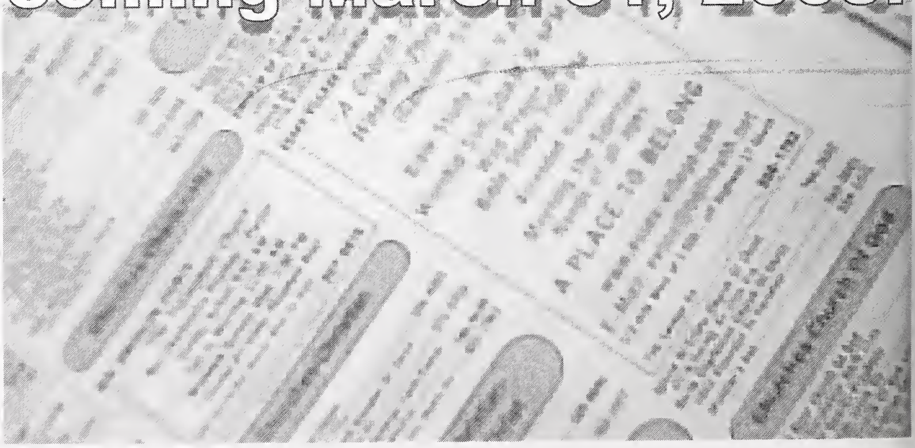

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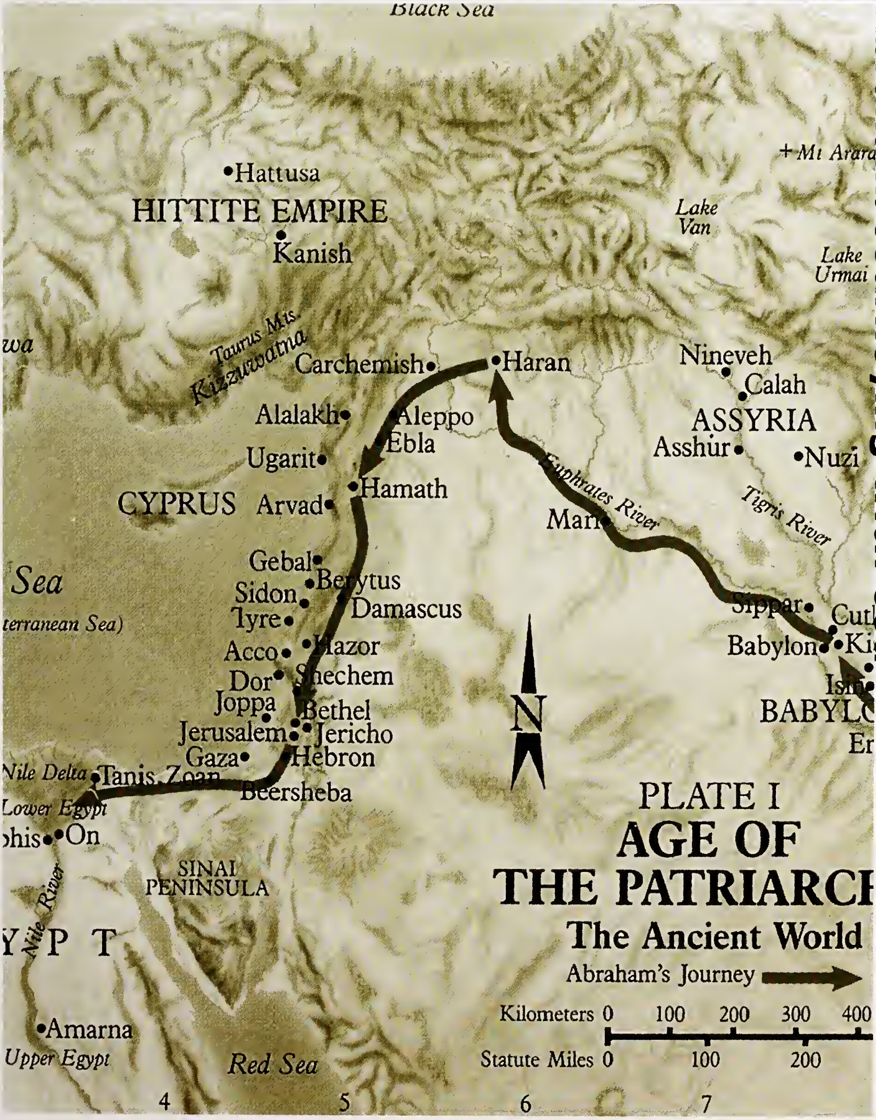
Abraham: Journeying with God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Dennis Conner, Editor
Richard Boese, Managing Editor
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Mark Hudson
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Hope's Paradox

by Dennis Conner

You can read the story in Matthew 2:7-18. It's not a nice story. It's a dark story, a very dark story revealing the wicked capacity of a blackened heart. Herod will brook no rivals to his power, not even a child born into a peasant family. In order to protect his throne, the desperate despot issues the order to have all the boys of Bethlehem two years old and under put to the sword. Sweet children. Innocent children. Children of mothers who loved them. Children ripped from the nursing breasts and protective embraces of their mothers and thrown headlong into the gaping jaws of death. Weeping and wailing filled the streets of Bethlehem that day with no comfort in sight. Where was God when Herod's marauders descended upon the village?

“In Jesus the fullness of hope has come...”

The intervening centuries have done little to nothing to mute the cry, “Where was God?” Virtually every tragedy reignites the debate, “Where was God in the face of evil?” Where was God during the holocaust? Where was God during Stalin's reign of terror? Where was He during the Rwanda genocide? Why didn't He prevent 9-11? Where is God when our loved ones are diagnosed with terminal illnesses, or die in accidents, or suffer and die at the hands of others? Ironically, perhaps the answer can be found in this very same story of Herod's slaughter of the innocents. “Now when they (the wise men, DC) had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream saying, ‘Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him” (Matthew 2:19). One brilliant night in the small town of Bethlehem, the enfleshed gospel, the hope of the world was born into a sin-riddled mess. That infant hope was named Jesus. The wise men brought news of the birth of Hope to the ears of King Herod, fueling the flames of his paranoia. It was then that the seeds of evil blossomed once more, leading Herod to seal the deaths of innocent children. And where was God? Protecting the hope of all humanity by opening the way for safe passage to Egypt. Even as Herod's soldiers were carrying out the wickedness of a crazy tyrant, hope was kept alive so that all mankind would one day be blessed. Not even the darkness of Herod's soul could quench the light of hope. And it has been that way ever since.

Man continues to wreak unspeakable evil upon his fellow man. Innocent people continue to suffer and die. And nature itself rains down destruction and death upon the race. People still die in ways that leave their loved ones breathless and grieving. And in the midst of all that darkness, where is God? He is there in the darkness, too, keeping hope alive in Jesus. The child of Bethlehem would also be called “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.” That’s where God is when wickedness and death strike. In Jesus we are reminded that God has entered fully into our human experience. In Jesus we are promised that death is not the end and evil does not have the last word. In Jesus the fullness of hope has come, offering prospects of life and peace. The question will always be asked, “Where is God in the face of evil?” And we may always answer, “Keeping hope alive.”

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Personal Goodness = National Greatness

by Ron Newberry

alexis de Tocqueville (July 29, 1805 - April 16, 1859) was a French political thinker and historian. His most famous work is *Democracy in America* appearing in two volumes published in 1835 and 1840. Tocqueville once observed what we have no doubt witnessed: it is easier for the world to accept a simple lie than a complex truth.

Tocqueville made a number of interesting observations about democracy in the fledgling country called America. One of the most important ones to me was his remark, "America is great because America is good. If America ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."

Reflect on that remarkable statement. "If America ceases to be good, she will cease to be great." That's amazing insight isn't it?

> "Self-sacrifice seems to be in short supply"

I wholeheartedly concur with Tocqueville. One question involves the basis of the goodness of this great nation. Another question revolves around the proposition that it is impossible to have a good (moral) nation or local community without yielding to the will of God. Ah, there's the rub.

Over and over in local, state and national elections it is increasingly apparent to me that when given the opportunity voters in growing numbers vote for self-interest over the interest of the whole community. That isn't surprising when on every other level—including religion—there is an escalating quest to have "my needs met." In other words, everything comes down to "me," and "me" alone.

Today we teeter on the brink—if we haven't already plunged headlong into the abyss of selfishness—of determining the direction of the nation by self-interest instead of acting in terms of moral, ethical and religious principles. During the 2004 election voters said that morality played a large role in the casting of their votes. While not wanting to sound cynical I hope that this is a trend and not an aberration. Unfortunately in our postmodern world we've allowed the "self" to become the measure of everything. Self-sacrifice seems to be in short supply.

The critical factor is good (moral) societies are the only ones that truly work in the long run. Goodness for the sake of goodness is the ideal because it reflects the heart of God. However, goodness has a practical side as well. Serious students of history surely would acknowledge that there is a direct and significant relationship between personal integrity in a society and that society's prosperity. That assertion should not surprise those of us who embrace Christianity and the principles of goodness defined by God.

Moral civilizations are built upon principles of honor, trust, and the lawful behavior. They flourish because they are harmonious, the people respect their fellow citizens and they have a common conviction in something and someone bigger than themselves. Doesn't life become infinitely simpler when we don't waste blood and expend treasure skirmishing over turf, fighting for advantage, and struggling for power? This doesn't imply a totally passive attitude that permits immoral, evil people to take advantage of our good will. It is an observation that a gentle, quiet spirit bolstered by goodness at a personal level translates into a great society. "If America ceases to be good, she will cease to be great." Chilling thought isn't it? How are we doing America? Since you and I ultimately control only one person in this world—namely, ourselves—we need to ask how we are doing personally. So, how are you doing personally in the area of goodness?

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Chapter 1:
The Creeping Shadows

by Ron Newberry

Editor's Note: Ron Newberry, our esteemed Associate Editor, has just published his first book, **Out of the Shadows: Learning to Live in the Light**. *The book is available at PublishAmerica.com, Amazon.com, and Barnesandnoble.com. To whet your appetite, we offer below an excerpt from the opening chapter. Congratulations Ron!*

dark, ominous clouds rolled menacingly into Jerusalem and blanketed the city. Lightning flashed from horizon to horizon. The surging storm would soon reach a crescendo. Nothing could bridle the wild and relentless tempest which hung heavy over Israel ready to deluge the city of David and sweep away the carpenter's son.

Early Friday Afternoon

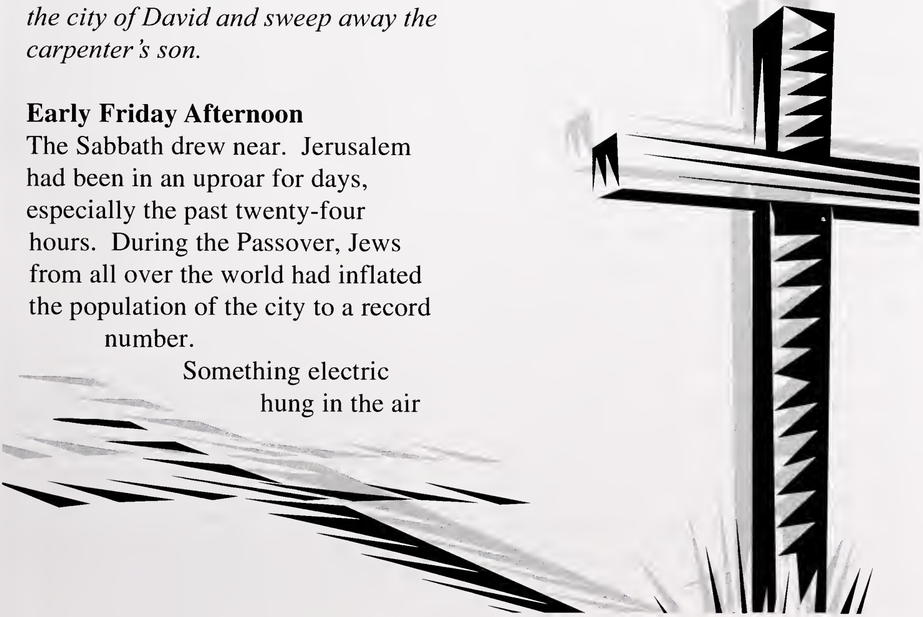
The Sabbath drew near. Jerusalem had been in an uproar for days, especially the past twenty-four hours. During the Passover, Jews from all over the world had inflated the population of the city to a record number.

Something electric hung in the air which made this Passover different from all others. In the distant past, a lamb had been slain and its blood had protected the fledgling nation from the death angel in Egypt. But that was in the dim remote past. This day another lamb would be slain. This lamb would serve as…

…Pilate's scapegoat!

…The Lamb of God!

His blood would drip from the rough beam of the cross and mingle with the dust. That trickle of blood would swell into a torrent that would flow from Calvary and surge over the world from that moment forward to the end of time and backward to the beginning of time, washing all who would kneel in its flood.



Abraham

by Paul Watson

Abraham. "Father of many nations" (Genesis 17:5). Claimed by Jews, Muslims, and Christians as their primary ancestor, either in a physical or a spiritual sense (see Romans 4:16-17). The epitome of faith. Not a perfect man—remember his disclaimer, made not once but twice, about his "sister" Sarah. But a man who trusted God, who consequently was justified by God, and who lived in covenant with God.

Five articles in this issue of *Carolina Christian* are devoted to Abraham. The first article, written by Ken Chaffin, reminds us of Abraham's initial response to God's call—a response that remains a model for us today (Genesis 12:1–9). Abraham's remarkable generosity in his dealings with his nephew Lot (Genesis 13:1–8) is put into focus by Bob Mason. God's "wild promise" of a son to Abraham and Sarah, and Sarah's laughing response (Genesis 18:1–15, 21:1–7) are explored by Mark Banks. The testing of Abraham on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:1–19)—one of the darkest, most disturbing texts in either Testament—is illuminated by Mike Dublin. Finally, Chris Smith reminds us that we, like Abraham, "are a transient people looking for their true home" (Hebrews 11:18–19).

To his critics who took pride in their genealogical links to Abraham, Jesus said, "And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Matthew 3:9). Which is precisely what God did: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. . . . If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:26, 29). Praise be to God.

Paul Watson serves the Cole Mill Rd. church in Durham, NC as elder and preacher. He can be contacted at paulwatson@nc.rr.com.

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Abram's Risky & Dangerous Call:
Genesis 12:1-9

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by Ken Chaffin

Leaving everything you know and care about to migrate to who-knows-where can only be described as either foolishness or faith. There is no in-between. Either you admire Abram's faith, displayed in his courage; or you consign him to the most stupid pool of humans that you've ever heard of.

Consider the facts. The One and Only God (Yahweh – "I am who I am" by name) seems either to have been forgotten or replaced by other fictitious deities. In scriptural terms, sin was rampant. But God makes himself known again in this fellow Abram. Abram was a Semite of Chaldean origins, minding his own business when his dad's family began a migration to points north and west. They were headed for Canaan, the soon-to-be-called "Promised Land," but they came to settle halfway along in their journey at Haran. Then God came to Abram to call him to leave family and home and go ahead to that Promised Land. In a time when such a migration was foreign to most every culture, this call could only be deemed courageous or foolish.

That's the way with the call of God. It is dangerous. It is dangerous because it comes from out of nowhere. It is dangerous because of its bluntness—a bluntness that calls for unquestioned loyalty. It is dangerous because of its open-endedness. And make no mistake: Abram's call is meant—indeed, is designed—to be understood as "our call." Genesis 12 begins the story of redemption for everyone. It is the beginning of God's answer to the problem of sin. The covenant with Adam solves nothing. The covenant with Noah is only a promise not to destroy everything again because of sin, until there is an opportunity for redemption. And Abram is the start of that redemption, the origin of salvation for the human predicament. Therefore the call to Abram begins the call to every human heart—the call of a loving God to His disobedient children (Romans 4:3, 20-24; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). "Hebrews 11:8-16 makes clear that our story is inextricably tied to that of Abram" (Rick Marrs, Embracing the Call of God).

Involved in this dangerous call to redemption is a promise and a proper response. Yahweh is a gracious God to even make the call. It is His call. Abram (humans) cannot initiate that call. It is Yahweh who wants to redeem, to extend His love to us. Abram is the chosen instrument. He is our father (Jew or Gentile) because God's redemption falls to anyone who has what Abram has—the proper response to such a call: faith. It is a radical faith, a dangerous faith that is meant to divide the men from the boys, the faithful from the fans. It is a risk to believe with so little evidence, to trust only on hope. Abram seems to have little history, if any, with this Yahweh who calls him. It says to us that our faith is also such a risk, but a passionate risk. Abram must renounce the past and move into the uncharted waters of loyal and obedient faith. We too learn early in the story of redemption that our proper response is risky faith—to live in obedience to God in all that we do, in all that we are.

Now comes the promise. Living this risky, dangerous faith will result in blessing; and that blessing is most clearly understood in redemption. Despite the danger and risk of answering the call, Abram (and we) are encouraged to embrace the future because Yahweh will carry us through. Despite the changes, despite the open-endedness of the call, despite the barrenness of the situation (11:30), Yahweh is so powerful that the only thing to come out of this will be blessing.

We have the advantage of knowing that is true. Despite the details of Abram's history that would threaten the promise, nevertheless God always shows himself to be true. When nations threaten, He gives the victory. When Abram gets the desert land, rather than the river-fed bottomland, God makes Abram wealthy. And just when it seems that the promised child is to be sacrificed, God provides the ram. Yahweh is faithful. All He requires is that we be faithful too, no matter the danger, no matter the risk.

One final point: Yahweh's promise comes with a kicker. Abram is blessed, but only so he can become a blessing. The lesson is well taken. We are not to settle into our promised blessings, but to make sure that others receive the blessing as well. There is no more evangelistic text in all of Scripture than the call of Abram. Before the story, there is nothing but sin, and certainly no hope. But Yahweh intervenes. He calls Abram to faith. God is His own evangelist. He offers the promise of blessing. And He tells Abram that He intends for that blessing to be multiplied throughout the earth.

So the choice is ours – risky, dangerous faith that looks to the world like foolishness, or true foolishness masquerading as human success and achievement. Abram found the way to blessing, joy and meaning. Risking all, "Abram left, as the Lord had told him" (12:4). The outcome was magnificent and serves as an example to any and all. "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness; and he was called God's friend" (James 2:23). The call has now come to us. It comes to us in the person of Jesus, the direct descendant of Abram, who provides in his life and death the portrait of what it means to answer the call of God in faith. How we embrace Jesus determines how we answer God's call—His risky, dangerous call.

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ… If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the Promise" (Galatians 3:26-27, 29).

Ken Chaffin serves the North Raleigh church in Raleigh, NC. He can be contacted at prophet520@aol.com.

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Build an Altar!

by Bob Mason

"Do you want fries with that?" Life bristles with trivial decisions. But then, there are the not so trivial decisions. "Will you marry me?" Now there is a serious decision impacting the whole future of two people—plus children.

When Abraham and Lot returned from a traumatic trip to Egypt (Genesis 13), the easy choice led them back home. But their flocks had prospered so much that their previous home between Bethel and Ai could not support the livestock of both of them.

To quell the quarrelling between their herdsmen, Abraham and Lot decided to part company and choose new pastures. Not a trivial decision. Although he was the elder, Abraham gave his nephew Lot the first choice. And Lot made the easy choice—the fertile valley of the Jordan River.

Abraham kept his flocks in Canaan, moving south to Hebron. Lot's choice of the abundant, fertile valley was a solid business decision; but the wickedness of the city of Sodom cast an ominous shadow across the spiritual well being of his family. Lot remained a righteous man (2 Peter 2:7), but his family suffered enormous loss upon leaving the wicked city.

Leaving Sodom, Lot's wife turned to look back, and was turned into a pillar of salt. Later, the indiscretions of his two daughters spawned the nations of Moab and Ammon, whose idolatry and wickedness plagued Israel for many years.

Reading about Lot's family situation thrusts us into the 21st century, where we face the same opportunities and the same pitfalls of life. If we make good business choices, but fail to consider the spiritual impact of those choices on our families, we may likewise experience the same spiritual loss as Lot's family.

After Lot left, God repeated to Abraham that famous promise that reaches its fullness in Genesis 17. God promised Abraham the land of Canaan; but the promise of numerous descendants is the part that impacts us today.

One single descendant of those "as numerous as the dust of the earth"—Jesus Christ—brought to the world the fullness of God's rich blessings. The genealogies of Matthew and Luke, written from different perspectives, both list Abraham in the family lineage of Jesus. And through Jesus, God offers his grace to all who will believe in him.

Abraham expressed his faith when, given the second-best pasture land, he built an altar upon it at Hebron. Whatever matters pressed Abraham, first he had to worship God. This altar, like the one he built near Shechem, did not spring out of any casual afterthought, but out of Abraham's unfailing devotion to God.

We can order our lives after Abraham's example by taking whatever life deals us in business or other opportunities and putting them in their rightful place. Our faith and devotion to God come first, and he blesses us as we deal with life's ups and downs.

Or you might say, if you get the second-best pasture (job, life-situation, whatever), build an altar. God knows what to do from there.

Bob Mason preachers for the Aberdeen church in Aberdeen, NC.

[trends of interest]

Religious Flux

There are indications that the Christian faith, though still dominant in America and around the world, is losing ground. The percentage of American adults who identified themselves as Christians (including non-practicing identifiers) in 2001 was 77%. This compares to 86% in 1990; an unprecedented decline of 9% for the period. Worldwide Christianity remains the most popular religion with 34% identified as Christian. However, at the present rate of change, Islam will be the dominant world religion by the year 2050. (www.religioustolerance.org)

Religion Important to Most Americans

Although the importance of religion has been declining in most developed nations, it remains strong in the United States. 53% of Americans consider religion to be very important in their lives. This compares with 16% in Britain, 14% in France and 13% in Germany. (www.religioustolerance.org)

Sarah's Laughter

by Mark Banks

"Why did Sarah laugh?" Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh."

"Oh yes, you did laugh."

One can easily imagine a verbal exchange like the one above taking place, say, between a teacher and her students during serious classroom time. What strikes me as unusual, however, is that it is an exchange between God and a woman named Sarah (Genesis 18: 13-15).

Why is God so concerned about Sarah's laughter?

The answer, I believe, is that God detected in Sarah's laughter something bordering on incredulous disbelief. God had just promised Sarah something and the promise seemed so bizarre that it assaulted her world of possibility. Sarah's laughter at God's promise, if translated into words, could be rendered, "Yeah, right."

It is difficult for us to fault Sarah for her disbelief. Her life-situation, after all, was pretty discouraging. She is introduced to us in Scripture this way: "Now Sarai was barren; she had no child" (Genesis 11:30). Sarah's first recorded words show something of her disappointment, living as she did in a world where, for the woman, children represented security, personal value, and God's favor: "Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the Lord has prevented me from having children'" (Genesis 16:2). And what is the promise that God makes to "barren" Sarah? That she will bear a child! What is more, this promise comes to Sarah only after she is post-menopausal; she is ninety years old! Writer Frederick Beuchner captures something of the absurdity of this promise when he observes that Sarah will have her baby in the geriatrics wing of the hospital and Medicare will pay the bill!

Now granted, laughing at God's promise is probably not the best thing to do. But who among us, if we really listen, can completely suppress a snicker when we hear Jesus promise something like, "If you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you" (Mark 11:23)? This doesn't square with what we know about how things work in our world, does it?

Spina bifida required that Stuart walk with crutches, and the lengthy icy season in Minnesota made mobility even more difficult for him. So Stuart moved from Minnesota to Texas for the warmer climate. I met him one Sunday morning when he visited our church with some friends. His friends moved on, but Stuart continued to come to church, and eventually he became a Christian. Shannon, a young lady in our church, earlier had shared with me her dream of someday marrying a good man. She had been praying about this for some time. But Shannon faced a challenge: she had been born with arrested joint development and, while she could walk with crutches, she required assistance in getting to her feet. Any future marriage partner would need to be a special person, someone who would be considerate of her special circumstances. Shannon wondered whether there was such a man out there.

You know where this story is going. Stuart and Shannon have now been married for over a decade, and they live in their own house near Shannon's parents. Soon after he and Shannon were married, Stuart said to me, "I came south looking for warm weather and a job. I found the Lord and a wonderful wife. I never dreamed life could be this good."

"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" That was the Lord's response to Sarah's laugh of astonishment and disbelief. Even though Sarah doubted, the Lord kept his promise to her. A son was born to Sarah and Abraham. What could she do but laugh? She pictured her friends hearing the news of a ninety year old nursing mother and giggling away at such a strange and delightful reality. Abraham joined in the fun and named their son Isaac, a name that means "he laughs" (Genesis 21:1-7).

It would seem that God and Sarah had a good last laugh together, but God's promise was not exhausted with the birth of Isaac. When God fulfilled his promise of blessing to Sarah and Abraham, God reached through their joy and new life to bless others. Jesus, after all, comes to us through Sarah. God still blesses his people so others can be blessed through them. Shannon and Stuart, for example, continue to bear witness to God's love and power in a world of hopeless dead-ends.

Wild promises come our way: "You really can forgive, and be forgiven. You can love and help those who don't love you. You will overcome all obstacles, grief, and fears. You will be raised from death and given a body like Jesus' body, never to die again. You will then participate in a grand reunion, a feast that will last forever."

Will we really? Faith's vision is sometimes blurry, not unlike the aging eyes of Sarah that strained to take in the mysterious visitors who came through the shimmering heat of midday, bringing with them a promise that was difficult for the ears of Sarah to hear. Sarah likely knew, as we do, that it is best to have a faith that is "never doubting," for the doubter "must not expect to receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6-8).

But sometimes …sometimes we receive the blessing even when doubt is watermelon-size and faith is the size of a mustard seed. We are saved by our faith, but Sarah came to understand another critical truth: it is the Lord's faithfulness in keeping his promises to us that has priority. The apostle Paul knew the story of Sarah and Abraham well, a story of human doubt and of God's grace. So it is no wonder that Paul can say that what was promised by God to us, struggling believers that we are, would be fulfilled "through the faith(fulness) of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 3:22).

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Mark Banks serves the Cole Mill Rd. church in Durham, NC.

The Test
Genesis 22:1–19

by Mike Dublin

this passage of scripture known as the Akedah—the binding of Isaac in Jewish liturgy and thought, but the sacrifice of Isaac in Christian theology—is one that has created a considerable amount of trouble for many of the readers of this story. When the passage is read, many questions come to mind. Significant among the many questions are, "Why would God test Abraham since he knows all things? Why create the ethical dilemma of killing another human being for no apparent reason? Why is Isaac referred to as Abraham's only son, when in fact Ishmael had been born to Abraham and Hagar years earlier? What real choice did Abraham have in this matter?" The space allotted for this article does not allow for an examination of these and other significant issues in this rich and compelling text. However, we will focus on issues that we hope will enable us to draw closer to God the father through Jesus our Lord.

In order to have any meaningful understanding of this story of God and Abraham, we would have to go back to Genesis 11:27 where the account of Abraham's genealogy is given. In Chapter 12, God calls Abram (Abraham) to leave Haran, his home and the life that he had known. God gives very general promises to Abram, yet he begins the twenty-year-plus journey that would lead to the "binding" or "sacrifice" story in Genesis 22.

When Abram arrives in Canaan, (Gen. 12:7) God gives a more specific promise that Abradm's seed would receive this future blessing of inheriting the promise land. Although this promise is more specific, Abram still does not have a grasp of the reality of the promise; yet he continues to follow God's will as he understood it at the moment. Abram appears to indeed be a "man of faith," totally trusting God for whatever he will face. However, Genesis12:10 contains an important clue that trouble lies ahead. Famine in the Land of Canaan and the surrounding lands indicate there will be very difficult times for all the inhabitants. There was literally no food supply, not a low supply. How can Abram be expected to trust God in his daily living when he has been commanded to leave his lifestyle of plenty to arrive in the Promised Land where there is no food? As soon as Abram arrived in the land of promise, he had to leave for Egypt. Perhaps, from God's view, the question might be whether Abram would stay the course in the face of this life- threatening set of circumstances. From Abram's view, perhaps he would question whether God would keep his promises and provide a way for him to sustain life. On the other hand, would he have to take matters into his own hands?

Abram's journey of faith is tested as he goes into Egypt and wisely concludes that the Egyptians would want his wife Sarai because of her outstanding beauty. However, Abram's decision to save his own life by stating that she was his sister begs the question of how much his faith mattered to him at that moment. Remember, he is our Hebrews 11 "hall of fame" man of faith. There are several implications here, but my point is to look at his faith at this point in his journey. Was this a test from God? Abram and Lot almost seem to be a side story in Chapters 13 and 14, but the story refocuses in Chapter 15. I sense a natural frustration in Abram's response to God's admonition for him to "not be afraid because I am with you." Abram wanted a child! Nothing else mattered much because without a child his inheritance would go to Eliezer of Damascus. Again, God affirms his promise and is even more specific in that the promise specifies that Abram's own physical descendants will inherit the promise.

Chapter 16 begins with the reality that Sarai had not given birth to a child. The initial promise from God had been made eleven years earlier and confirmed on more than one occasion. Nevertheless, Abram agrees with Sarai to take matters into their own hands. The results proved disastrous as Hagar, their maid, gave birth to Ishmael (Abraham's son) and conflict arose immediately, with God having to protect Hagar and Ishmael when Sarai had them banished. When we get to Chapter 21, Isaac is born "at the very time God had promised him." Isaac means "he laughs." Surely, there was laughter for both Abraham and Sarah because they have now received the one thing that mattered more than anything else to them, a child. They could hold him, hear him cry, watch his first smiles, pray when he was sick, tell all of their friends about this miracle, a special gift from God Almighty. Surely life would be easy now and Abraham would be trouble-free after what he had gone through.

"Some time later God tested Abraham," (Chapter 22:1) Oh no, not again (my response). It gets worse, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

"Who's laughing now? I have given you Isaac as I promised, now let him go. Not to another tribe, territory, or culture. Let him go in death, by your own hands."

This is where we become overwhelmed. This is where the questions arise, where we wish the story were not there. However, it is a part of Abraham's journey and our journey with God. This is where all the songs and sermons about one of the "heroes of faith" in Hebrews 11 comes to a conclusion. In Chapter 22:15-16, God and Abraham now know that Abraham was willing to trust God for the future. Abraham was not in control of the future and could not change it or influence it; only God controls the future. Abraham didn't even have a place to bury Sarah; he had to buy the burial site from a

Hittite. When Abraham died, he had not seen the great numbers of descendants promised; in fact, he had one son at home. It would be 800 years before his descendants would posses the Promised Land, and even later before, they would become a great nation.

My conclusion is that when God makes a promise, it is fulfilled only by and through His will. I have a choice to stay on my journey of faith or I can take matters into my own hands. This is not much of a choice for me. I have already made my life difficult enough that I do not want to attempt ever again to change the will of God to fit my views of this life. I am also unwilling to bash myself daily because I have not arrived yet as a man who is able to totally trust the future to God. Like Abraham and each of God's children, I will eventually learn that our gracious Holy Father and our Savior Jesus Christ are indeed all we need if the Holy Spirit is allowed to direct our paths as they are ordered in Heaven.

Mike Dublin preaches for the Rochester Heights church of Christ in Raleigh, NC.

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I Can't Feel at Home

by Chris Smith

You know that point in your life when you realize the house you grew up in isn't really your home anymore? That idea of home is gone. Maybe that's all family really is. A group of people who miss the same imaginary place." So spoke Andrew Largeman, the fictional main character in Zach Braff's directorial debut, *Garden State.*

Largeman (also played by Braff) is a twentysomething actor who has returned home to New Jersey for his mother's funeral. The movie is about the time he spends there, the people he connects (or reconnects) with, and the attempts he makes to feel at home again. I found myself riveted through the entire film, rooting for Largeman to make a connection that would mean something, to find a place where he could feel at home.

When the connection was finally made, I was disappointed. His connection comes (as should not surprise anyone who watches movies) in the form of a woman. An amazing woman, no doubt, brought alive through the talents of actress Natalie Portman. This young woman's name is Sam, and she meets Andrew in a hospital, where she is being treated for epilepsy. Their mutual brokenness draws them to one another and, in just four short days, Andrew has found a soulmate in Sam. As the film draws to a close, Andrew speaks these words, "Safe…when I'm with you I feel safe…like I'm home." His sentiments echoed those of a popular Billy Joel song, "You're My Home." It is the sentiment that says to another "wherever you are, that's where I want to be…wherever you are, that's my home." To be fair, this wasn't a "you complete me" look at love. This love had depth, and it made me glad for these two imaginary folks I had come to call friends in just two short hours; but it made me sad for them as well.

All throughout the film, Andrew Largeman acts as an excellent example of Everyman on the journey of life. His struggles are our struggles, his search is our search; and so it pained me to see him fall short of his goal. When he spoke of this imaginary place that we all long for, I wanted to cry out "It's real! That place is real!" When he finally found his "home," his "safe" place in Sam, I wanted to warn him that this wasn't the relationship either of them should call home. The home they were looking for is found in a greater relationship, and that place we all miss is the City of God.

Hebrews 11:13-16 speaks of a transient people who are looking for their true home. It ends by stating that this home is not on earth, but in the City that is waiting for them. In other words, our home is the place where God resides, wherever He is, that's our home. Earlier in the same chapter, we are reminded of the faith of Abraham, who was called by God to leave and "go to the place that I will show you." Abraham showed his faith by packing up and, while traveling through the world, never making himself at home. The people of God are defined by their desire for something more than this, by their longing to be where God is and their willingness to follow Him wherever He might go.

Christ calls his people to the same place and the same faith. Just as Abraham is called to "leave" and "go," so we are called to "repent and believe." When we do so, we begin a great adventure. We become a transient people, longing for that other place. We live "in the world, but not of the world" because we know "this world is not our home." It is for that reason that we refuse to make ourselves at home. We refuse to get wrapped up in the things of this world. We refuse to get too comfortable, because we know that we are not long for this world, and that a better home is being prepared for us. Jesus said to his followers that he was going to prepare a place for them and that "If it were not so, I would have told you" (John 14:2).

From the moment of our baptism, we set out for a place that we have not seen. The steps we take, in faith, we take because we are certain of our place in God's kingdom. The risks we take, we take because we long for the place that we call home. Those risks would be absurd were it not for God's leading, just as Abraham's first steps of faith would have been ridiculous without God's call. Were we to meet a man with suitcases in his hand and ask him where he was going, we wouldn't expect the answer "I don't know." We might be attracted to the whimsy in his response, but we might also wonder about his sanity. On the other hand, if that man were to answer "I'm going where God leads," we might wonder, instead, at his faith. Like Moses' steps back into Egypt, like Israel's first steps onto the dry ground of the Red Sea, like Peter's first steps out onto the water, we take a step of faith because we believe in the power of God's call.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says it this way, "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). He goes on to speak of a place prepared, of a home with many rooms, and of the promise that where he is, there we will also be. Jesus understands our longing for home, and he has created one for us. Our home is the place where he resides. It is with him and in him that we feel at home. But will we know the way to get home? Will we worry, as Abraham must have, about how we will get to the place we are going? In our case, we have the advantage of knowing Christ. When Thomas asks how we will know the way home, Jesus responds, "I am the way." Throughout the gospels this message is repeated: Christ is the way, the door, and the vine. He is the connection that we are all looking for.

But Christ's message does not end there. He is, indeed, the way home, but there are steps we must take to get there. As chapter 14 continues, Jesus explains what these steps will be. In verse 11, he says that we must believe in him. In verse 15, he says that we must keep his commandments. In verse 23, he says that we must keep his word. But all through this chapter, the idea of home is present. For us to have a home in Christ, we must allow him to make himself at home in us. Though faith is being sure of what we do not see, we will see Christ, because he will live in us; if we keep his word, we will be loved by the Father and the Son and they will come to us and make their home with us.

Andrew Largeman's journey is our journey, his search is our search; but his final discovery is not our final hope. While we can draw strength from earthly relationships, we know that our home is in Christ. As C.S. Lewis writes in *The Problem of Pain,* "Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home." Our longing can only be satisfied when we trust and obey, leave and go, repent and believe. The kingdom of God is at hand, and we must trust in the one who rules over it to make for us a home. We must keep our eyes on the final destination as a way of keeping our focus while here on earth.

Hebrews 11:14 says that people of faith speak as those "who are seeking a homeland." Too often, we have made ourselves at home in this world, allowing it to shape us as long as it promises to keep us safe. But we will never be safe here; we should never get too comfortable, because this can never be our home. If it is, then it is the place that we will grasp onto and the things it offers will be the things we struggle to keep. But if we know that this world is not our home, then we can put the phrase "you can't take it with you" into practice.

In the year 2000, well-known rock band U2 released an album titled All That You Can't Leave Behind. Bono, the band's lead singer and a longtime Christian, keeps home and heaven as a continued theme throughout the album. In one particular song, "Walk On," he warns of trying to make a home in two worlds. He speaks of the things we try to make for ourselves in order to give ourselves meaning. In one strung-out cry he shouts "All that you fashion, all that you make, all that you build, all that you break" and then "all that you sense, all that you scheme, all you dress up, and all that you see," warning his listeners that these things can become "all that you can't leave behind." His answer to this predicament is that "home is where the heart is" and that "love is not the easy thing, but is the only baggage that you can bring." These are wise words, and they reflect the truth of Hebrews 11. Hebrews 11 that speaks in terms of faith and hope, but always knows that "the greatest of these is love." If we believe in Christ, have faith in him, put our hope in him—live as he lived and love as he loved—we will find our home in him. That place you grew up is not your home; but that place we long for is real.

Chris Smith is youth minister to the Cole

Active Listening

by Mikal Frazier

Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well–being" (1 Corinthians 10:24).

Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Recent research has discovered evidence of the very great need for humans to connect. Certainly we have known for decades the essential need of infants to be nurtured with human contact. Scientists have found the actual avenues for connection in the human brain. These are so distinct that it has been termed "we are hardwired for connection." Along with this thought, the actual location where rejection is registered has also been identified. And when rejection is sensed, it is accompanied by severe pain signaled in this particular part of the brain.

We, as human beings, want to know that we matter. Our need to know that we matter is so great that the late communication guru, Virginia Satir, said, "With every utterance we are seeking validation." We want to be heard.

Because we do care about one another, we can learn specific skills that will enrich our listening to one another, encouraging, validating and enriching our connection. The act of this kind of validating listening is called by several terms: active listening, empathic or empathetic listening, and reflective listening.

A friend recently shared a story in our ladies' class as we were discussing the topic of active listening. One of her grandsons, around 5 or 6 years old, was visiting in her home. This particular grandmother is most doting, but also quite busy. She was working on a project as her grandson shared a story. After a bit, as the grandmother was listening and tending to other responsibilities, her grandson said, "Mammaw, are you listening to me?"

Well, yes, her ears were hearing, but he wanted more. He wanted more validation that real connection was occurring. He really wanted to know that he mattered. Someone has said, "Talk is cheap, listening is rare." Maybe a twist of this quote would be "listening is precious." It is a gift of validation to another. If you will think back, many of your mentors and those you have perhaps chosen as role models were likely very good listeners.

A University of Maine researcher, Dr. Marisue Pickering, identifies four characteristics of empathetic listeners:

1. Desire to be other-directed, rather than to project one's own feelings and ideas onto the other.
2. Desire to be non-defensive, rather than to protect the self. When the self is being protected, it is difficult to focus on another person.
3. Desire to imagine the roles,

perspectives, or experiences of the other, rather than assuming they are the same as one's own.

4. Desire to listen as a receiver, not as a critic, and desire to understand the other person rather than to achieve either agreement from or change in that person.

Other skills that will give the message of genuine listening and even empathy are:

1. Give verbal or non-verbal messages of awareness and attending to the other.
2. Comment on the actual verbal content from the other.
3. Attempt to identify and name the feeling being experienced within the context of the message being given. If you are wrong they will correct you.
4. Offer interpretation of what is being said, but be tentative.
5. Summarize the feelings and content being expressed.
6. Ask questions to seek further information.
7. Give feedback, possibly sharing personal information.
8. Use your own style of expressing warmth and caring.
9. Clarify by seeking to know that what you are understanding is valid.
10. Practice silence. This gives the message you have the time and care to genuinely hear the other.

This approach to one-anothering is an awesome way to express agape for one another. God is love. God is agape. As we give value to one another, we are becoming more what God would have us be.

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Mikal Frazier can be contacted at Mikal@allaboutfamilies.org.

Stand Firm, Hold Fast

by Kent Massey

It is said that Lyndon Johnson, in the course of his campaigning, told some small farmers that he understood their needs because he was a rancher himself.

One cattleman asked, "How big is your spread?" "It's big," Johnson replied in his Texas drawl. "I get in my car in the morning, and it's sunset before I cross my own property again."
Like most people, this cattleman knew politicians. "Yeah," he replied, "I had that kind of car once, too…didn't run worth a cuss."

The political season has just recently concluded (mercifully). If you are like me, you grew weary and worn of rhetoric concerning WMD, healthcare, tax cuts, tax raises, terrorist threats, war waffling, and predictions of desolation and destruction if a certain candidate doesn't win. In listening to the candidates, you get a sense that they want to remind us that if they don't win, then we are doomed.

This "doomsday" mindset existed in the first century church as well. In Thessalonica, there was a report that Jesus had already returned, and the Christians there were worried. Paul admonished them in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 "not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed." We don't exactly know why the Christians were so upset with this rumor, but Paul told them to get a grip. He said:

"Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-5; 13-17).

Paul reminded them not to get caught up in the frets of the future, but to get on with living the life of faith; "stand firm and hold fast the traditions" they were taught.

How should we as Christians respond to this political season? We usually employ one of the following:

- We check out. We withdraw from the culture, retreat to our own warrens of safety, and refuse to get involved. We want to move away from the noise and chaos to a place of quiet rest. Our heads are buried in the sand, and we don't seek meaningful contact with the world to which we are called to minister.
- We give out. The volume of bad news wears us out. We no longer believe that we are relevant, and regardless of what we do or say, nothing will change. Others have come to believe that the social problems we face are inevitable and overwhelming. As a result, we aren't interested in the transformation of the society, because such a transformation is impossible. It is not about the social gospel but the social implications of the gospel.
- We freak out. We are immobilized by fear. On the night of the Great Chicago fire in 1871, there was another wildfire that set the town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin aflame. Over 1 million acres were scorched, and 1,200 people perished. More people would have likely died had it not been for Father Peter Pernin. As the fire ravaged the town, many people headed for the Peshtigo River. When Father Pernin got there, however, he found most people still on the riverbank. They had looked at the immense fire and just stood there transfixed awaiting their fate. Father Pernin started shoving people in the water, which broke the spell and mobilized the terrified crowd, who—seeing the water of salvation—leapt and were saved. It's always good to remind ourselves of what baptism stands for. That no matter what happens, it isn't over until God says it is.

But how should we respond? Paul's advice to the Thessalonians is still good advice, "Stand firm and hold fast." In a culture that is accustomed to not standing firm or holding fast to anything, we are invited to do that very thing. Stand on something. Stand for truth. Stand by someone.

Soren Kierkegaard tells the parable of a theater where a variety show is proceeding. Each show is more fantastic than the last, and is applauded by the audience. Suddenly the manager comes forward. He apologizes for the interruption, but the theater is on fire, and he begs his patrons to leave in an orderly fashion. The audience thinks this is the most amusing turn of the evening, and cheer thunderously. The manager again implores them to leave the burning building, and he is again applauded vigorously. At last he can do no more. The fire races through the whole building and consumes the fun-loving audience with it.

Kierkegaard opines: "And so, will our age, I sometimes think, go down in fiery destruction to the applause of a crowded house of cheering spectators." Regardless of who sits in the White House, God still sits on the throne. God is sovereign, and He is in control. Instead of fretting and wrangling this season, let's "stand firm and hold fast" and know that God's purposes and plans will prevail.

Kent Massey can be contacted at kmassey@prcoc.org.

Snakebites & Communion

by David Kneip

"Bow your head, be quiet, and think about Jesus!"

When I was growing up, I didn't understand why people acted the way they did during the Lord's Supper. I liked the fact that we had crackers and grape juice every Sunday, but I didn't understand why we always got so quiet, you know? From watching the grown-ups, and later from talking with them, I learned that many Christians use that time to focus on Jesus and his death on the cross. To me, the message was pretty simple: "Bow your head, be quiet, and think about Jesus!"

Now, those of you who know me know that I'm a little fidgety. My attention span isn't very long, and sitting so still when nothing is going on (no singing, no talking, etc.) was and still sometimes is pretty difficult. Anybody out there like me? Well, let me tell you a couple of Bible stories that I think may help.

In Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, which is recorded in John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14-16). Do you know what Jesus is talking about here? As you probably guess from the mention of Moses, it's a story in the Old Testament, specifically, Numbers 21:4-9. While they were wandering in the desert, the Israelites grew frustrated with their life in the wilderness, as they had done so many times before, and they cried out loudly against God. So what happened next?

"Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived" (Numbers 21:6-9).

This story is one of the places where early Christians saw Jesus in the Old Testament—probably because Jesus himself did, too! Why would they have made that connection? Well, in both stories something is lifted up on a pole (the cross) which is a source of healing for the sick. It's a means of salvation given by God which recalls something deadly (the snakes/the cross) but that God uses for good. They saw the bronze snake, a means of healing, as looking forward to Jesus, the means of healing.

So why does this help during Communion? Well, if I read the story in Numbers correctly, it looks like not all the people got bit by the snakes, right? "If anyone..." But here's the thing: it seems that snake reminded the whole community of Israel of what God had done for them. The reason we know this is that they kept it around in their worship for so long that eventually it received a name, became a kind of idol, and had to be gotten rid of in 2 Kings 18:4! In other words, even people who had not been bitten by snakes seem to have looked at this bronze snake as a reminder of what God had done for the people. Get it? They're thinking about other people—how God—healed them.

As we've said, when we're having the wonderful celebration of the Lord's Supper (now that we're old enough to appreciate it!), when we're tired, distracted, or weighed down by sin, sometimes it's hard to remember what God has done for us, right? But just think: there are Christians all around you—your friends, as well as people older and younger than you—and you may know how God has touched them. Whether he's healed them, brought them to faith, or walked with them through difficult times, I bet you know some things that God has done in others' lives. Why not act like the Israelites and give thanks to God for those things?

This doesn't mean we shouldn't focus on God for ourselves. What it does mean is that on those difficult days, we shouldn't just give up and check out. It also, I think, helps us remember that we worship as individuals but also as a church body, and part of that, I think, is remembering what God has done for our brothers and sisters and worshiping him for it.

May this help you all at the Table in the future.

David Kneip can be contacted at dkneip@nd.edu.

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Is It Worth It?

by Peter Rode

Paul was chosen by God to be a servant of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact he says of himself that he was set apart before he was born (Galatians 1:15). In his conversion account to Agrippa, Paul told the king that Jesus had appointed him "as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'" (Acts 26:16-18).

Once his sight was restored following his conversion, Paul began to preach. He didn't wait. He preached for everything he had stood against:

...that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel
...that Christ was the true representative of God and God's chosen Son
...that He was the Son who was perfect in obedience, the ultimate revealer of God, and the Savior of the world.

Paul accepted the claims of Jesus and the church, the very thing he had sought to destroy. For Saul to suddenly shift his loyalties from Gamaliel and the Law puzzled those who heard him. This was the man who had wreaked havoc on the church in Jerusalem. He came to Damascus to take prisoners back. They were baffled as Paul stood there proving that Jesus was the Christ. Paul had come to kill. He had come presenting letters of authority and demanding the extradition of the followers of the Way. He came as a man with a commission issued by the high priest's authority. He left as a messenger of a higher authority, the authority of the Lord. He left Damascus filled with the Spirit; filled with words of power and life.

However, along with his calling came suffering. Paul lived out the words of Jesus who said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). He was imprisoned, beaten, exposed to death again and again. He was stoned and left for dead. He was shipwrecked, in danger on rivers...from bandits...his own countrymen...his enemies. He went without sleep, left in the cold and naked. He knew hunger and thirst. He learned what it meant to suffer!

Was it worth it for Paul? He wrote near the end of His life: "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). Yes, it was all worth it for Paul. Is it worth it for you? Are you willing to lose everything in order to gain Christ?

Peter Rode serves the Friendly Ave. church in Greensboro, NC.

Reaching Out

by Jerry Senn

It was Winston Churchill who said, "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give." I don't believe any one of us would argue that believers in Christ should not serve others. Jesus, after all, came to serve, not to be served, and we're committed followers of Jesus, right?

Statistics show that the church in America is less and less influential, but we don't need statistical studies to tell us that. We all know lots of people who don't think the church can help them. As Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson write, "There are many reasons for this, but two stand out. First, as messengers, Christians have a difficult task, not because the message isn't compelling, but because we aren't always compelling messengers. In fact, we are often our own worst enemies. Society is no longer scandalized by improprieties among those who follow Christ; it has come to expect them. Second, we have to tell the truth to a world that no longer believes in truth" (*The Externally Focused Church*, p. 11).

The most effective way to reach people today with the message of Jesus Christ is through genuine acts of service. It's essential that we get this point in our minds and not wander from it or allow ourselves to become distracted with things of less importance. Only by becoming involved in passionate service will we restore credibility to the message we have been given by God to share. It is more than telling the truth; it is also showing the truth that is important if we would succeed. After all, isn't this the model we learn from Jesus? He served others and met real human needs. When Jesus did this, people listened.

Erwin McManus wrote, "People have given up on the truth because they don't believe anyone can be trusted." In my experience, I believe he is right. The world is full of people who have been hurt by the hypocrisy of those who were supposed to help them. This credibility gap can only be bridged when trust is re-established. To do that, we must first show our ability to love and serve.

We all love to think of ourselves as "good Christians," as genuine followers of Jesus. But there are two items which most clearly reveal what matters most to us: our checkbooks and our calendars. We may claim otherwise, but the way we spend our money and our time exposes what really matters to us.

We talk and sing about service and everyone agrees it is important. But do we really know how to effectively meet the needs of our community and reach lost people? And, are we willing to step outside the safety net of our church pews and cross the street into real life, real world acts of service in order to share the truth of Jesus Christ? Let us determine to become known as a body of believers who love and serve people.

Jerry Senn serves the Hendersonville church in Hendersonville, NC as preacher and elder. He can be contacted at hvlcoc@bellsouth.net.

What Brings You to Church?

by Paul Jarrett

No one attends church accidentally. Someone, or something, brings us to church. We may be here because our parents, spouse, or some other relative brought us. We may be here because we were invited to come by a friend. Or, we may have come of our own accord because of something we felt a need for in our own life.

Some of the things that bring us to church may not be all that commendable. These motives may not be bad, but they are generally self-serving. Jesus encountered this in His own ministry, and it led Him to observe, "You seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled" (John 6: 26).

We may come to church out of habit. We may come because we would feel guilty if we didn't. We may come to maintain appearances, and have the approval of others. We may even come because we enjoy the "performance"—the preaching, the singing, and the emotional rush. Or, we may simply like the people and the social interaction that we have with them.

I would like to suggest to you three things that bring people to church that are to be commended. Not only are they proper motivations for coming, but they are also three things that people have a right to expect to find when they do come to church.

Transcendence

I believe many people come to church looking for something which transcends and gives meaning to the life we live here on earth. We have all had occasions in this life to identify with the words of the Preacher when he said, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Those who are experiencing the loss of a loved one, the pain of sickness, a heart broken by a shattered relationship, or any other life experience that can leave us asking "why," and longing to see beyond this veil of tears need to find in church the transcendent God. We all need to connect with the One who "causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him."

Relationships

Many people's first encounter with the church is a result of a relationship they already have with a member of the church. It is no secret that the quality of the relationships that a person has with other members plays a key role in their faithfulness to Christ and His church. We live in a world that has become increasingly impersonal as a result of the fact that most people are focused on their own desires and doing their own thing. When the church functions as God intends it provides a marked contrast. Church is a place where its members, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."

While outsiders may be initially attracted to the church as a place where their own needs will be met, the key to their coming to have meaningful relationships lies in their coming to have the same care for others.

Direction

While people may come to church initially as a result of an invitation of a friend or family member, they continue to return because they are finding direction for their life. This is why it is so important for the pulpit and our Bible classes to be places where the word of God is faithfully taught and applied to the daily lives of the hearers. When this occurs they will come again, saying, "You have words of eternal life."

Paul Jarrett can be reached at pejarret@earthlink.net.

year-end planning

During the holiday season, thinking turns to themes that are significant for year-end planning:

- *Thinking About Family* Year-end is a good time to review estate planning for family and make certain it is up to date in every respect.
- *Thinking About Financial Matters* At year-end important decisions about tax-related matters such as deductions and income are considered.
- *Thinking About Giving* The holidays turn our thoughts to gift giving as a way of showing love and appreciation to others.

This year as your thoughts turn to family, finances, and giving, consider Southeastern Children's Home for a tax-deductible year-end gift or as a beneficiary in your will, living trust, or other estate planning strategy.

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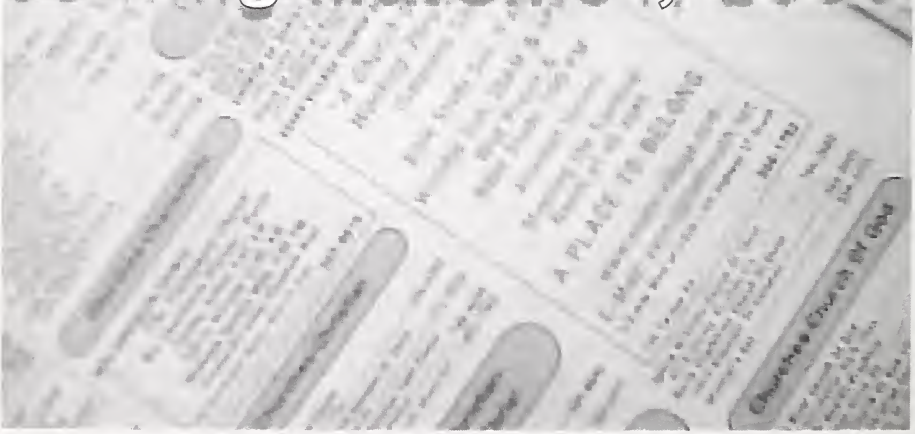

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